



THE VILLA OF THE PEACOCK



RICHARD DEHAN





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The Villa of the Peacock

The Will of the People

1899

The Villa of the Peacock

And Other Stories

By

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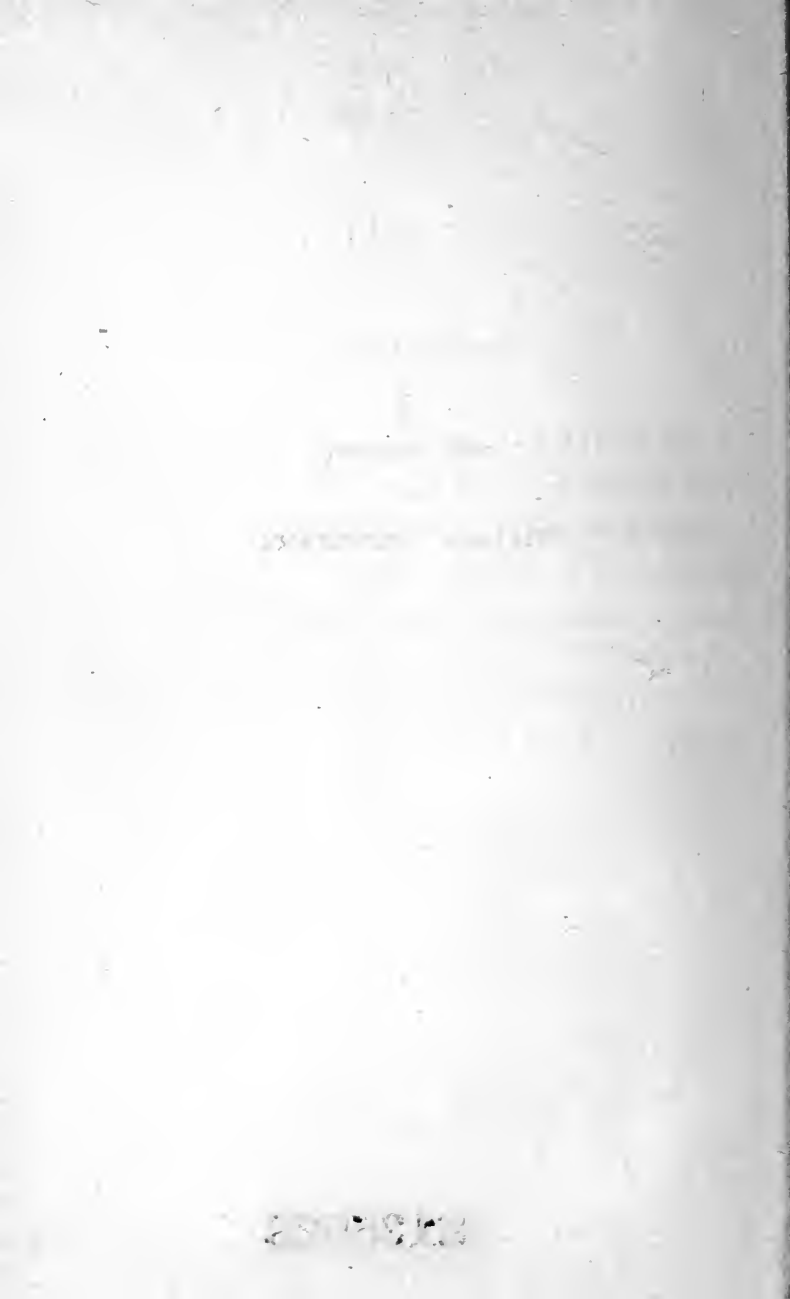
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TO
THE MEMORY
OF
WILLIAM HEINEMANN

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
VILLA OF THE PEACOCK	13
THE FORMULA OF BRANTIN	79
DOROTÉA ET CIE	123
THE SLUG'S COURTSHIP	168
THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF AN AUTOMOBILE	215
THE SILVER BIRCH	296
COUNTESS AND COUTURIÈRE	307

CONTENTS

1	THE HISTORY OF THE ARMY
2	THE HISTORY OF THE NAVY
3	THE HISTORY OF THE AIR
4	THE HISTORY OF THE LAND
5	THE HISTORY OF THE SEA
6	THE HISTORY OF THE SKY
7	THE HISTORY OF THE EARTH
8	THE HISTORY OF THE SUN
9	THE HISTORY OF THE MOON
10	THE HISTORY OF THE STARS

THE VILLA OF THE PEACOCK.

I.

It stands in a fashionable suburb of the gayest and prettiest watering-place in all the Kingdom of Donda, San Silvestro on the Bahia, close to the northern frontier. Of cream-white stone, quaintly designed and beautifully built, its high-pitched roofs sheathed with the deep chocolate-brown tiles of Donda North-West, its shutters, casements, balconies, doors, verandahs, enamelled lizard-green, the sumptuous villa standing in carefully-tended grounds full of palms and tree-ferns, mimosa, syringa, magnolia, and the white-blossomed acacia, Persian lilac and jasmine, white, pink and yellow, embowered in its thickets of roses, its verdant lawns adorned with beds of seasonable flowers, seemed a fit setting for a mistress as handsome as the sardine-merchant's wife. On the level of the drawing-room balcony between the long windows, a ten-foot high plaque of magnificent majolica representing a peacock in all the glory of his displayed plumage had been built into the wall.

The peacock has gone, leaving a long scar upon the masonry. The House of the Peacock stands

empty, its paint blistering, its woodwork warping under the savage rains and frosts and suns. Don Abramo Zabalza is dead; dead also is the lovely Donna Teresa who turned the heads of the dandies of the Plaza de Nautilo and the Avenida, and many persons of greater importance, and never suffered an admirer to kiss the tip of her little finger. "For am I not," she would demand of her female friends, making great eyes of indignation and folding her white arms upon her swelling bosom, "a virtuous married woman, the *esposa* of my Abramo and the mother of his child?"

"And such a child!" the gossips would squawk in chorus. "'*Dios, que hermoso es!*' To see the angel in his little goat-carriage upon the Paseo with his nurse and his *aya*, as splendid as a little king! And the likeness! Was ever anything so marvellous? Two chick-peas could not be more alike!"

And innocent Donna Teresa would laugh and blush and shake her finger, plumper than of old, but a dainty little digit still, and if her infant angel happened to be near, whip him up and kiss the narrow oval cheeks and the bright brown eyes and pouting underlip of the urchin who so oddly resembled the youthful King of Donda, though senior to his sovereign by a year.

One recalls how suddenly Aldobrando I. of Donda, a good churchman, a capable ruler, and a faithful husband to his Austrian wife, died upon a hunting expedition among the mountains. The receipt of the telegram precipitated an event eagerly

awaited by all monarchists. Vast crowds assembled outside the royal palace at the Dondese capital of Calamaria upon the night of the Queen's day of bereavement, asking one another: "Will it be a King?" When the royal standard with its great rampant bulls was hauled down from half-mast to run up and break at the top of the flagstaff, a sustained "*Th' th' th'!*" of relief went up from all those lisping Latin palates. The guns of the fortress were dumb out of consideration. It was a hot spring night. The people dispersed to eat *gaspacho* and tortillas and drink the health of the new constitutional monarch in frothed chocolate, syrup of currants, or *sorbos* of *aguardiente*, whilst guitars and mandolins throbbed or vibrated accompaniments to national and loyal songs, and shouts of "*Viva el Rey!*" rent the clouds of state-monopolised cigarette-smoke tangled amongst the branches of the oaks and cork-trees beneath which the tables of the revellers were set. For to the contented monarchists of San Silvestro, where so many million *duros* of the royal revenues were annually spent, a baby King a brace of hours old meant continuance of the dynasty under which security and good order, piping peace and comfortable quiet had been enjoyed by classes and masses, who had reason to sicken at the memory of the years of confusion, intrigue, plot, and counter-plot—pull devil, pull baker—between a Pretender to the throne and an Heir-presumptive robbed by reversion of the Salic Law.

II.

The resemblance of the sardine merchant's son to his young sovereign did not lessen with the boy's growth. It was marvellous, extraordinary, one of those strange and not unusual duplications of an individuality that have constituted the amusement, the provocation, very often the torment and the curse of the men or women thus played upon by jesting Nature since Shakespeare wrote *A Comedy of Errors* upon the theme.

Abramo Zabalza, originally a fisherman of the Bahia, who had invested his wife's dowry in business and amassed a fortune as a sardine-merchant, became richer still, unluckily for his youngster, who was reared by fond and foolish parents in luxury, and gratified in every whim. Twice in each year the King visited San Silvestro. One may be sure the attire, carriage, gait, mode of speech, habits, tastes, whims of the royal urchin were carefully noted by the doting Teresa and her circle of gossips, nor was Zabalza himself innocent of vanity in this regard.

Certain lackeys of the palace—persons honest, responsible and trusted, but chatterers nevertheless—one or two elderly duennas of the same type, were made welcome at the House of the Peacock, to be flattered, caressed, and cosseted on condition that they talked about the King. Don Enrique himself

—the spoiled and pampered urchin—learned that such and such tones, gestures and movements bore more fruit in the gratification of his wishes than others, and worked the oracle. When he was ten years old or so, his sailor-suits and costumes *Ecossais* were (privately) procured from the firm of haberdashers who imported these garments for the youthful Aldobrando II. On his tenth birthday the King entered as a cadet of the Royal Infantry Training School, and since their idol's vulgar antecedents debarred him from sharing the studies of royalty, the infatuated parents must buy their cub a little uniform to strut in at *festas*, and engage a sergeant-instructor to drill him into shape.

As might have been expected, as the boy became a youth and the youth a man, this fostered idiosyncrasy became obsession. He framed himself laboriously upon his model, reproducing characteristics until tricks of expression, gait, voice, became involuntary. Educated by a constantly changing succession of highly certificated private tutors, the finished product of their labours bore out, upon the attainment of his majority, the truth of the vulgar proverb connected with a multiplicity of cooks. A handsome person, agreeable and easy manners, a taking bonhomie, lavish generosity to those who humoured his whims, or aided in the gratification of his wishes, were counterbalanced by a fierce and jealous temper, a disdainful attitude towards those high things which have at all times commanded the

reverence of the noble-minded, and a most colossal vanity.

Dressed for the part for which Nature had equipped him, the heir of the rich sardine-merchant speedily became chief with a set of polyglot undesirables, frequenters of the Gran' Casino and hangers-on of the Opera *coulisses*. These were tickled by the oddity; even *flaneurs* of a better class took Don Enrique up and petted him, so that uninstructed foreigners, seeing the youth made much of in such company, conceived wild ideas of the democratic habits and easy-going abnegation of reserve and dignity manifested—or so it seemed to them—by Donda's constitutional sovereign. Never by word or look or sign had the King showed himself aware of the existence of the double who haunted public places where royalty drove or walked, dressed, as far as his tailor dared humour his idiosyncrasy, after the fashion of His Majesty; until, after a flying visit to a northern capital, the betrothal of Aldobrando II. was announced in the *Court Gazette* and such daily Press organs as were staunch in their advocacy of monarchist principles; when, greatly to his consternation, Abramo Zabalza received a visit at his counting-house from an official of the palace, the Court being at the moment in residence at San Silvestro.

The honest sardine-merchant had prospered greatly since the birth of his bantling. From a dealer in the raw commodity, he had become a manu-

facturer, exporter and purveyor on a huge scale of the sardine in oil, the sardine in oil with olives, *tomatoes* or *pimiento*. Two manufactories under the name of Zabalza ceaselessly turned out, except on Sundays and *festas*, a constant stream of the preserved delicacy in all its varieties, which, with various other cates and comestibles, Abramo Zabalza, *Especerio* to His Majesty, retailed at six large establishments in the town.

The interview was short but effective. The Queen Mother's Chamberlain delivered his message. For years the presumption of Zabalza had been noted, tolerated, and pardoned in recognition of his spotless character and in sympathy with the parent of an only son. Now, since presumption had overleaped all barriers, since a young man whose plebeian features Heaven had designed to model in some degree of likeness to Heaven's own anointed, not only favoured the resemblance by unlawful means, but exhibited himself to the people of San Silvestro, at the Gran' Casino, the restaurants, ball-rooms, and other places of resort less reputable, in the company of undesirable persons, both male and female, at last the sword must fall. Behold Abramo Zabalza, who had thriven in royal patronage, deprived of the royal warrant. Further action on the part of supreme authority could only be stayed by the summary exile of Zabalza's offending son.

"*Excellencia*, mercy!" the unhappy tradesman stammered. "Never have I or the boy's mother

dreamed of offending Her Majesty. . . . From childhood to manhood . . .”—Abramo was getting incoherent—“the Holy Saints my witnesses . . . devotion to the Throne as to the Faith! But to send away our son—*No, es imposible! Por Dios, Excelencia*, plead with Their Majesties!”

Thus the unlucky Abramo. But the Chamberlain was inexorable. Having been endured, the younger Zabalza could no longer be tolerated.

“Her Majesty grieves at the necessity of inflicting so severe a punishment. Don Enrique must take up residence abroad, *señor*. The royal warrant must be taken down from the shops and the manufactories and erased from all tins, boxes, bottles, and catalogues. Your son must live abroad—in Paris a young man of his tastes would find a very agreeable *pied à terre*. Her Majesty particularly indicates Paris, pray remember: Paris is the condition of her continued leniency and Christian toleration towards yourself and your family! For now—now that the King is to take upon himself the responsibilities of a husband and a father, the inviolability of the royal reputation, the spotlessness of the royal character, the sacredness of the royal person, must not be tarnished by the constant presence upon the soil of Donda of an individual bearing so infernal—ahem!—so compromising a likeness to royalty as your son. Accept these terms with gratitude for the clemency of Her Majesty. Obey at once, or the police will close your shops

and manufactories, the royal warrants will be taken down by the public executioner"—a neat touch that—"and burned at the municipal *destruidor*"—another. "And so, *señor*, I leave you in the keeping of Heaven."

Upon which, with the usual compliments, His Excellency took leave and was conducted to the door. And the unhappy Abramo, who had grown obese with his banking account, suffered an attack of vertigo and was taken home by his chief cashier in a cab to his terrified and bewildered wife. Upon being bled and cauterised, he recovered sufficiently to falter out the story, and expired, fortified by the rites of Holy Church, before noon of the following day. Before the tombstone recording his virtues as citizen, husband, and father had been completed and set up, his heartbroken Teresa followed him. Don Enrique found himself heir to a great fortune and without a friend in the world. His pious mother's religious director, a Canon Regular of the Cathedral of San Silvestro, a personage of high principles and discretion, in favour with the Court and Society, and popular amongst financial circles in the town, assisted the young man to arrange the matter of turning the Zabalza business into a limited company. Thus, being possessed of a large fortune, besides something approximating to another half-million in fully-paid shares in the parental concern, the exiled son of Zabalza the sardine-merchant shut up the Villa of

the Peacock, quitted his native land of Donda, and betook himself to France.

III.

Don Enrique Zabalza, up to the age of thirty-six, when sublunary matters ceased to absorb him, was a familiar figure in the Gallic capital, as at Rome, Vienna, Hungary, Monte Carlo, Biarritz, and other pleasure-resorts of the world.

The passage of years seemed but to intensify the resemblance that was at once his good fortune and his bane. Physically speaking, that is to say, for the high degree of personal courage displayed in the attitude of the monarch towards anarchists, for instance, would have been impossible to Don Enrique. To laugh when the revolver-bullet of a would-be assassin has grazed one's cheek, or when the coachman and wheelers of the State coach have been killed by the explosion of a bomb; to change coolly over to a Minister's carriage and proceed upon the route; to have been exposed for one calendar month to risks and perils such as every day and every hour attend upon the pathway of the most Catholic and constitutional sovereign of a country seething with hatred of the Church and rotten with Rationalism, Positivism, and anti-Christianity, would have speedily whitened Don Enrique's hair and reduced him mentally and physically to a jelly.

But he was a notable runner, leaper, and

swimmer, a fine swordsman, a master of horsemanship, a keen automobilist, a matchless tennis-player, and a courageous gamester to boot; possessed, moreover, of a discriminating taste in wine, tobacco, masculine fashions, and feminine charms. And he took care to exhibit the more showy of these accomplishments upon all the famous world-arenas where kings compete with commoners, achieving successes duly recorded in the fashionable intelligence-columns of the newspapers to the immense amusement of Society, and the undisguised delight of his townsfellows, the brawny fisherfolk and the plump tradesmen of San Silvestro's old town.

"El Mozo has won the Paris Grand Prix with Petardista, his *caballo de carrera*, and broken the bank again at Homburg" (or Monte Carlo, or Monaco). "He has carried off the Gold Cup at the trials of the *Cercle de l'Escrime* and disarmed Domenichio, the Italian *maestro*. And yesterday, on the Deauville *raqueta*-courts he won the first single in the Tobert cup tie after a battle of two hours in the blazing sun. It may be, *amigos*, that by the permission of the saints, we shall one day see him play for San Silvestro Old Town on our own *juego de pelota*, for it is a shame a Dondese of Donda should do no honour to his native city, and the boy is an angel and a wonder at the game."

"El Mozo" ("The Boy")—that was the old town's nickname for the exiled scapegoat and

scapegrace. As nicknames will, it stuck to him and followed him. Did not Miss Jeanette K. O'Geogehan-Sculpin, the distinguished American journalist, in one of her sparkling "Society Snapshots," regularly cabled from Paris to the Editorial Bureau of the *Fortnightly Female Compendium of Social Doings*, published at Pottstown, Penn., U.S.A., communicate, that, at an afternoon reception at the exquisite hotel of Madame la Comtesse Chiquet de Petit-Bleu (not far from the Fauberg St. Honoré) she (Miss O'Geogehan-Sculpin) had enjoyed the distinguished honour of meeting the Marquis of Almozo, brother (upon the ringless hand, be it whispered) to His Majesty the K. of —

This item of aristocratic intelligence, imported from Paris and bruited in New York, recrossed the herring streak. London society periodicals of the less illuminated, served up the Marquis de Almozo anew. Ere long the use of the title, ingenuously conferred upon Don Enrique by Miss O'Geogehan-Sculpin, became general. Some pretty lady at the Court of Donda tittered it into the ear of Aldobrando II. from behind the shelter of her fan; some pompous minister, at the close of a political or diplomatic conference, may have unbent in the frank atmosphere of the King's study sufficiently to broach the jest. Aldobrando II. laughed heartily, suggesting that the *Archivista Réal* should be directed to draw up the patent, and that

the Heralds' College of Donda should be commissioned to design a coat-of-arms for the new peer, quarterly of four, blazoning three sardines, *argent, naiant* on a blue field, waved, a tomato *proper*, a tin-opener erect, *gules*, and a peacock in its pride.

A poor piece of wit, possibly, but sharp enough to pierce to the very quick of its object. Zabalza's mistress, a dancer of the Opera, who had been refused some costly *biblot* she coveted, had gathered the story from an *attaché* of the Dondese Ministry at Paris, and half in anger, half in jest, repeated it to Don Enrique. The result took away her breath. Ten first-class devils were unchained in her Futurist flat in the Rue Kleber by her own indiscretion. She gained the sensation of her life, and hopelessly lost her heart to a man whom, until that moment, she had tolerated and betrayed.

"*Ah'h!* Infamous! Vile wretch! Is it thus you stab me? Me who have cherished you as the ball of my eye! . . . Has Heaven given you no more wit than serves you to leap to your ruin? *Qué desgracia!* that I should have wasted my thousands on you. . . . What am I doing? . . . See what I am doing! . . . *Y pués!* are not the accursed things my own? . . . *Puéca! Sucia!* Thrice abominable! There! there! and there! . . . Behold!"

Thus Don Enrique *furiosamenté*, whilst darting hither and thither, from the big glass-topped toilet

table to the vast wardrobe, from the boudoir to the salon and back again, he stuffed his pockets with the jewels, his gifts, which the imprudent fair one had worn at supper on the previous night, tore up laces, jumped upon marvellous hats, reducing them to ruins, swept priceless china-ware and valuable bric-à-brac from *étagères* and tables, starred costly mirrors with stabs of the poker, slashed oil-paintings by celebrated masters to ribbons of canvas, and did not desist from his self-imposed labours until the *concierge* of the Avenue Kleber flat, accompanied by a policeman, appeared upon the scene.

Don Enrique was more than gracious in his reception of these visitors. He greased the palm of the *sergent de ville* with a billet of 50 francs, told the *concierge* to sweep up and chuck into the dustbin all that rubbish, including the prostrate form of the swooning diva in the contemptuous southern gesture which accompanied the words. Then Don Enrique looked for and found his hat, set it at a defiant angle, rang up his car, descended to the vestibule, and quitted the flat and its mistress for ever, not without protestations upon the lady's part.

She had never been so vilely treated, she vowed in a whole series of letters, written on rose-tinted paper with passionate purple ink. The man was a human monster—a being incapable of remorse, dead to honour, deaf to sentiment, adamant to the

assaults of love! She would forgive everything if Don Enrique would return. That was the refrain. But Don Enrique never did.

He had lived gaily and enjoyed life, but he was a Dondese of Donda, who had been rendered fatherless and motherless and exiled from his native land for no reason other—thus Zabalza phrased it—than an accidental resemblance to his sovereign lord the King.

Now the King had jeered at the man whom he had injured. Thenceforward, above the attractions of sport, the charms of the green table, the allurements of sensuous pleasure, the desire of vengeance reigned paramount in the heart of Abramo's son. To the attainment of his end he now sought and obtained the entry into circles composed of units instead of individuals, who owned groups instead of families, and answered to numbers instead of names.

IV.

What is anarchy?

Anarchy is the negation of order, produced by the fevered revolt of the degenerate human unit against those governing institutions, monarchical or republican, which are accepted by the sane majority as indispensable to the maintenance of order and the resulting welfare of mankind. The social revolutionary, while professing to despise power and the employment of organised force,

which men term militarism, aims at the acquirement and monopoly of unlimited power by terrorism, which is force applied without humanity. To-day, in Bolshevism, we have example of what wanton wreck and ruin, degradation, brutality, and filth must inevitably follow the unscrupulous use of terrorism. In the spring of 1914, when the catastrophe of world-war was close upon us, we were less wise than we are to-day.

Civilisation wavered on the edge of Armageddon, the aërials of great wireless installations thrilled with intrigue and warning, the tuned spark sang of the coming life-and-death struggle in the ears of many men in many quarters of the globe.

Upon a night in the May of 1914, in a long, bare, ugly basement room in Soho, only illuminated by a grated pavement-light, through which the municipal standards in the street above threw a bluish glimmer, rendered stuffy by an anthracite stove at which many papers were continually burned, a gathering of men and women of all nationalities and types, some haggard and half-starved, some sleek and well-dressed, were assembled on rows of chairs, or benches ranged two or three deep about the plastered walls. They were delegates representing various centres of anarchical activity at this, the London Congress of Social Revolutionaries, held in the spring of 1914 to discuss forthcoming propaganda. In the centre of the room, under an incandescent-gas standard of the inverted T-type,

eight men and two women sat in the semi-gloom about a table of ink-stained deal. A Windsor arm-chair was at the table's upper end, where were writing materials, a small auctioneer's hammer, a telephone standard, a kind of ballot-box, a wine glass containing a few fresh green grass-blades and a little brass bell. Presently a trap-door in the floor lifted. A shaggy head butted it up, and the thick-set person to whom the head belonged, moved to the chair at the table-head and sat heavily down in it. As he did so, every other person in the room rose up.

The man now occupying the Windsor chair was known to everybody present, and to nobody. He had no name amongst Social Revolutionaries other than "The Bell." "The Bat" would have been a more appropriate pseudonym for the mysterious shaggy man in the shabby clothing. Possessed by the colossal ambition of seeing the world's existing social fabric overthrown and replaced by anarchical conditions, this individual passed his life in strenuous movement, ceaseless agitation, un-sleeping toil, unremitting vigilance. Constantly disappearing, to reappear suddenly in some unexpected quarter, he flitted from Paris to London, from London to Berlin, thence to the Russian capital or Vienna or Prague, thence to Rome, Madrid, or Calamaria, the torment of the *espions* of the world's secret services, the despair of the police.

He rang his bell, and a screen was pulled over the street light. The jets of the T leaped hissing into brilliance, revealing a seated company.

Proceedings began with a report of progress covering the active propaganda of the past five years. In breathless silence the revolutionaries listened as the deep-voiced "Bell" rose to read out the record. He grew livid as he proceeded. Great drops of perspiration started upon his bulging forehead to course down his purple cheeks. His blood-shot eyes projected from their orbits, and he wrenched at the dirty red handkerchief fastened in a singular knot about his bull-throat as though he were suffocating. When the record ended—

"Oh, my children!" he groaned forth in tones of deep rumbling bass. "What a falling off is here! Save a few petty acts of punishment, some isolated and unimpressive strikes, what has been achieved in the world during the last three years towards the attainment of the vast ideals of Social Revolution? The propaganda by deed has dwindled into mere sabotage, anti-militarism, and the dissemination of the articles of our great and glorious Neo-Ethical Code—not by terrible and magnificent acts, which the ignorant term crimes, but by lecturers who refresh themselves between the clauses with sips from a glass of water. A little longer—a few years more, unhappy children—and all that I have endured, laboured, suffered, will have been in vain! Social Revolution will be preached from

pulpits with velvet cushions, enforced with squirts filled with rosewater, instead of bombs packed with projectiles and loaded with deadly fulminates. No Kings will tremble on their thrones; no Presidents become prematurely white-haired for fear of the revolver, the stiletto, or the shattering bomb. Alas! my children——”

Sobs choked the utterance of “The Bell,” and a dull murmur filled the crowded basement room, intensifying until the mutterings of a storm seemed to beat upon the grimy whitewashed walls.

Ringling for silence, their great leader continued, recapitulating in swift trenchant sentences the triumphs of the past. He described with impassioned eloquence the glorious death of the last sublime martyrs who perished for the Cause in January, 1910, in the conflagration in Sidney Street, Mile End, and to arrest whom a platoon of Scots Guards from the Tower, three detachments of City police, and half a battery of Royal Horse Artillery, with three guns, were called ineffectively to the spot. He shed tears of pure admiration and reverence upon the grave of Emile Landry, the Paris bomb-thrower, as upon the tomb of the noble Kotoku of Tokio and his mistress, San Amabashi, the parents of communistic anarchism in Japan, who had plotted the Mikado's death in 1908 and suffered capital punishment by being sawn asunder.

He painted the stirring scenes of republican revolution in Portugal, and thrilled his hearers with

a fervently-expressed tribute to Manoel Buicci and Alfredo Costa, the assassins of the King and the Crown Prince. He went back to the Barcelona riots, strewed green laurels on the grave of Feuer, and described the outrage of the Calle Riosa, Donda, when Alejandro Mayor threw a bomb at the Crown coach on the occasion of the King's wedding, as a poetic and beautiful dream of revenge upon a tyrant, unhappily frustrated by Fate, for though fifteen unimportant persons had been killed and a score or so injured, the King and his bride had escaped with a scratch or so. His hearers wept with him as he described the suicide of Alejandro Mayor, who shot a rural guard who tried to arrest him fourteen miles from the scene of the outrage, and then turning his Browning pistol upon himself, cried: "This for one who has failed!" and, pulling the lever, died.

"Sleep, sleep for all time, oh, our brother!" "The Bell" concluded; "for the lesson of thy glorious endeavour and thy heroic exit is not lost. A man will arise who, guided by thy example and animated by thy spirit, will not fail us! Were I younger in years I would unflinchingly take the duty upon myself. Even now I—Shade of Caserio! What's that?"

Footsteps had thudded over the wired glass of the basement-light; there was a knocking at the outer door. Now the sound of trampling on the outer stair caused the venerable "Bell" to leap

from his chair, pocket his bell and sheaf of papers, and promptly vanish down the trap-door. Three heavy knocks upon the door threw the assembled delegates into horrible confusion. Some wrestled with the trap-door, which "The Bell" had bolted behind him, and which communicated *via* the cellars with an exit into Soho. Yet others slid back a sooty square of sheet-iron protecting the wall behind the stove-pipe, which, moving in grooves, disclosed a hiding-place large enough to conceal three or four men. While these fought to be first in, more unyielding spirits produced revolvers, daggers, or stiletti, or pastilles of deadly poison contained in tubes and carried upon the person, thus providing the certain means of escape from the clutches of the Law. Nobody swallowed one of these bonbons, or pricked his bosom with a point, or drew a trigger, thus proving the love of life occasionally stronger than the tenets of the Neo-Ethical code. But when the pass-word of the night was harshly and repeatedly bellowed through the key-hole, the revolutionaries mustered courage to unlock the door of ingress, which was of stout teak-wood strengthened with sheet-iron.

"*Hombre!*" said a Southern voice as a man wrapped in a dark mantle entered the stuffy basement. "But you stink infernally here!"

And discarding his black *capa* somewhat theatrically, he folded his arms upon his bosom, and confounded a majority among the anarchists, whose

black eyes and swarthy skins proclaimed them Dondese of the land of Donda, with the heartily-hated person of their own Most Catholic King.

V.

A moment of stupefaction ensued. Then a babel of shouts, curses, and execrations, the more appalling by being uttered in semi-stifled tones, broke out about the immovable intruder.

"*Himmelkreützbombenelement!* It is he! It is he of Donda!"

"Death! Death to Aldobrando II.!"

"*Kaput* to the puppet of monarchism!"

"Kill the pupil of the priests! *Abbasso! Male-dizione!*"

"Kill him here and now! *Carajo!* Is he not already sentenced?"

"*Mort, mort aux rois! Conspez le tyran!*"

A piercing voice made itself heard through the snarling of those wolves and jackals. A pale young woman, with brilliant grey eyes, one of the Heads of Centres distinguished by a seat at the President's table, thrust herself between Don Enrique and his assailants, crying, in a piercing tone:

"Comrades, you are in error! Do you not know that the King of Donda has a double? This is not Aldobrando, but the sardine-seller's son!"

At which "The Bell," who had reappeared unnoticed, pushing his way through the press of

bodies, thrust his bloated face near that of Don Enrique, and sternly regarding him with his fierce bloodshot eyes, said briefly :

“Comrades, this comrade of ours is right. ’Tis only the *mannequin* !”

And as a burst of jeering laughter cleared the air of electricity, he added, turning to the young woman :

“You, comrade, will give us your number and group.”

The young woman confronted the speaker and answered boldly :

“Number 11,339, Executive Centre 13, Warsaw.”

An electrical shock of excitement volted through the assemblage, and “The Bell,” opening his shaggy arms, said commandingly :

“Embrace me, daughter of Theodor Levinski !”

When the girl had obeyed, with palpable shrinking from the osculation, he returned to the Presidential chair and said, ringing for silence :

“Now then, comrades, let us be getting on. Meanwhile, let this fellow be kept under observation ; we will deal with him by and by.”

While Don Enrique’s hand was lightly touched by warm lips in a swift kiss, and the pale girl, as she raised her head, whispered, barely audibly, meeting the man’s flashing glance of thanks with a look of passionate regard :

“*Caballero*, I have paid part of my debt. This

is the hand that saved myself and my dearest father from the burning railway-carriage a year ago. You cannot have forgotten that accident to the Bordeaux-Orleans express?"

Don Enrique could not possibly have forgotten what he had never experienced. He bowed his head, gently looking in the face of the beautiful revolutionary, whose lustrous eyes were full of tears.

"It was between Angoulême and Poitiers; the engine and eight carriages were derailed and burning. But for you we should have perished horribly," continued the girl, "and the extremists of the Social Revolutionary party would have suffered frightful loss in the death of my father. He is Theodor Levinski, author of the 'Catechism of Anarchy' and the chemist inventor of the new fulminate." Her grey eyes glowed as she continued proudly: "The T.L. that has never been known to fail. No great deed of terrorism undertaken by its aid has fallen short of the expectations of its undertakers. The bomb of the Calle Riosa at Donda in 1906 was the first engine of revolutionary justice to testify to its marvellous powers. Since then the explosion at the Rue Fortuné in Paris in 1908, where thirteen persons suffered wounds and an enemy of Social Revolution suffered the extreme penalty,—the execution of Signor Vallclera outside the Italian Consulate at Zurich in 1910, the acts of justice performed at Vera Cruz, Montevideo, Santiago in Chile, and at Buenos

Ayres in 1912 and 1913, not mentioned to-night by our great President, but each attended by destruction of property, loss of blood, and death of persons inimical to extremists,—have testified to its superiority over fulminate of mercury and even picric acid ; and, thanks to you, Señor Don Enrique, my father lives to improve, if possible, upon this great and marvellous discovery.” Tears choked her voice as she added : “ I shall never forget how you appeared in my eyes, when, with a cut upon your cheek, unheeded though bleeding, your hands blistered and your clothes scorched by the fire, you broke the bar and the carriage-window and dragged us both out. Then, though it was cold that night, you stripped off your overcoat to cover my father, and divided with us your sandwiches and the brandy in your flask. Your wrist was badly burned, I remember, and I bandaged it for you with a handkerchief. Has the burn left a scar ? One would——”

“ Señorita,” said Don Enrique rather awkwardly, “ what I did was absolutely nothing !” And he spoke with complete veracity, because he had never in his life performed a deed of heroism. But his Southern quickness of perception warned him not to forfeit, at the expense of a slight terminological inexactitude, his hold upon the plank that had saved him from shipwreck, and he ended : “ For the scar upon my wrist, it has healed so completely that you would say there had never been a burn. I cannot claim for my heart the same immunity, for

it has never recovered from the deep wound dealt by your beautiful eyes !”

He spoke the truth about the eyes of Mademoiselle Levinski, for they were lodestars that had quickened many a susceptible anarchist to death. They regarded him now with an expression that could bear but one interpretation; and the secret conviction that it was the King of Donda who had unconsciously furthered the aims of the extreme terrorists by preserving Theodor Levinski for the discovery of even more terrible chemical combinations than the T.L. fulminate, and in so doing had won the heart of Mademoiselle Levinski, whetted the blade of his hatred to a keener edge than of yore.

But “The Bell” was addressing him, and in the crowded basement, full of fetid exhalations, while the incandescent burners purred and hissed under the dirty ceiling, and the eyes of the delegates were fastened upon the speaker, “El Mozo” told his tale of wrong and unfolded his plan of revenge.

In that exhausted atmosphere his dullish brain seemed to quicken, his limited intellect to develop, his mind to grasp, his purpose to consolidate. What he suggested would be, if carried out, a *coup* of wonderful effectiveness, a triumph for Social Revolutionaries all the world over. A crowned anarchist, an extreme terrorist reigning as a constitutional monarch, that is what the consummation of Don Enrique’s suddenly conceived plan would amount to, if it could be carried out. And its

astonishing simplicity made it possible to carry out. It was practicable in the extreme. When Don Enrique had finished, a spontaneous burst of applause betokened the approbation of the anarchists, and "The Bell," rising to his feet, proposed the immediate initiation of the neophyte, and the administration of the oath.

Upon a blade of grass, taken from the wine-glass that stood beside the president's inkpot, that terrible formula was recited.

"Acknowledging no Deity," said the deep muffled tones of "The Bell," "we, the Children of Social Revolution, take our great oath of obedience to the sacred statutes of our code upon the commonest and most insignificant work of Nature. Behold our emblem in this blade of grass. Tread it under an iron heel, it will spring up again; eradicate it with salt, burn it with fire, it will be re-sown by the birds and the winds, and re-clothe the barren field. It flourishes upon the dung-heap; it thrives upon the dust of peasants, soldiers, kings and statesmen; it covers with its green carpet of forgetfulness the levelled ruins of empires and the scattered ashes of republics, blotting out with rank luxuriance the mounds that were once monuments of men who forged chains, and made scourges and burdens of laws and customs, tithes and penalties with which to fetter, cow, and crush their fellow-men into the slavery that is indifferently called constitution, monarchy, dominion, federation,

union, state. Take now, repeating after me, the oath of the Social Revolutionary upon this blade of grass."

It was taken. Don Enrique Zabalza received his number and was affiliated to his group.

VI.

He was thenceforth, upon his own initiative, and at his own suggestion, committed to a strenuous mode of life. Social Revolutionaries, who were at the same time masters of science in all its branches—chiefly moral, political, legal, mathematical, ethnological, chemical, military—took him in hand and crammed him. His flesh was reduced by drilling and physical exercises; his somewhat vulgar accent corrected by skilled teachers of elocution; his dress and deportment, in like degree, underwent a painstaking and complete revision. Need it be hinted that the likeness of Don Enrique to the King of Donda grew even more remarkable under this régime?

In the autumn of that year the cataclysm of War broke upon us. Front after front burst into flame. One saw the world on fire. Donda, being a neutral country, suffered nothing more severe than scarcity of salt-fish and other popular comestibles and commodities customarily imported, and a superfluity of influenza bacilli imported from Northern Manchuria *via* France. Money also was scarce, though

that is nothing new in Donda. San Silvestro's two annual seasons were the pale ghosts of what they had been, and the *Teatro* without the Paris companies was undeniably dull.

But with the victory of the Allies and the proclamation of peace, gaiety returned to San Silvestro. That summer season following the rigours and privations of War was of memorable, marvellous beauty, the sky at dawn and sunset, jade-green between its reefs and lagoons of glowing orange or fiery carnation; the silver-surfed Bahia lipping on its snow-white sands; and roses, climbing everywhere, covering the balconies of the elegant garden-villas, draping the pillars, smothering pergolas and hedges with beauty, and drenching the whole countryside with intoxicating perfume.

One day towards the close of summer, the long-closed shutters of the Villa of the Peacock were thrown open. Whitewashers and painters renovated the exterior of the dwelling and departed, women with pattens and pails and scrubbing-brushes polished up the marble doorsteps and cleansed the floors of the loggias, and washed the swallow-droppings of years from the balconies. The winding avenues of cork-trees and live-oaks was scraped and regravelled; the garden, a wild tangle of beauty and luxuriance, sparingly trimmed. New draperies and laces were hung at the gleaming windows, the great majolica peacock shone dazzling in the sun. Wicker chairs and lounges

appeared upon the lawns. A Mexican hammock was hung under the rose-pergola, the long-silent fountain in the midst of it now awakened from its sleep of years, and gambolled, sparkling in the sun.

"The Villa is let," remarked people who did not know its story. "Or sold, possibly?" they added, shrugging.

"It is neither sold nor let," said other people who were older residents, "because Don Enrique, whom the folk of the *puerta* call 'El Mozo,' is still alive. They say he swore upon his soul that the shutters should never again be opened, nor a chair stirred from its place on the floor until——"

Nobody finished the sentence save under their breath. It had a sinister tag.

Presently San Silvestro was convulsed to the core through the posting of huge red-and-yellow *anuncios* outside the Raqueta Club grounds near the aërodrôme. A *tarja* of steel, heavily damascened with gold, presented by the King, was to be played for by picked teams from the two local clubs, San Silvestro Old Town against The Nobles, for Dondese blue blood may hit a ball in emulation of a plebeian, with whom it may not engage in a bout of foils.

A famous foreign champion, naturalised a Frenchman, but a Dondese and native of San Silvestro, was to play for the Old Town. Señor Don Enrique Zabalza y Cadéra (Cadéra having been the surname of dead Teresa) availed himself

with great pleasure, of the opportunity of renewing old relations, placed at his disposal by consent of the authorities under the high approval of H.M. the King.

Judge if the liveliest city on the western seaboard did not buzz like a stirred-up beehive. That the King should have removed the ban of exile after all these years from his unlucky simulacrum was not so extraordinary. No; but, by a thousand devils! "El Mozo's" acceptance of the royal olive-branch—that was the unlikely, unexpected thing.

With his characteristic shrinking from publicity the exile had elected to travel by air from Paris. The consent of the military and municipal authorities having been obtained, the military guards upon the frontier forts having been warned not to fire at the *avion*,—a twin-engined "Gourdon" aërobus, piloted by no lesser star than Suiza, now demobilised from the French Service Aëronautique, descended one mellow evening upon the carefully-kept greensward of San Silvestro's aërodrome. And amidst the loud *vivas* of the Old Town and the discreeter greetings of the nobles, Don Enrique Zabalza, attired in the latest mode appropriate to air travel, his marvellous likeness to the King much tempered by a pointed beard, stepped down, congratulated his pilot with a cordial hand-grasp, and assisted a lady, as well-groomed as himself, to descend from the passenger-cabin.

Hearts were lost to Señora Zabalza before the arrivals entered the automobile that waited to convey them to the Villa of the Peacock. She was *svelte*, with marvellous eyes, hair, and hands, and attired in the latest Parisian combination of furs and gossamer. As for Don Enrique—

“*Hombre!*” said one man to another man. “He would be more like the King than the King is like himself, had he not that English naval officer’s beard upon his chin. Shave it, and set them up together side-by-side, naked as their mothers bore them, and tell me who would distinguish between them? Not I for one!”

Both were Pressmen attached to two of the local journals, one so mildly Liberal, the other so gently Conservative, that it was as difficult to distinguish the politics of one from another as it is to tell a green fig from a fig that is green. Both men were greasy about the collar and lapels, and shiny as to the cuffs; both were married and had olive branches; and both were naturally on the look-out for any fat worm that might be carried home to the family nest. Not finding admission to the Velodrome easy, they had elected to wait for Don Enrique on the doorsteps of the Villa of the Peacock.

“*Caramba!* I should have no difficulty,” returned the second Pressman, “unless Don Enrique should bear upon the inner side of his right forearm the scar of a burn such as the King’s. How do I know His Majesty has such a scar, covered always

by a broad gold bracelet of four rows of curb-chain, linked to an upright bar? Perhaps the Queen gave it to him, *quien sabe?* But *hombre!* as regards the scar, *á muneca derecho*, two years ago, when Aldobrando played polo on the Club ground of the *Cazaderos*, and was unhorsed—you remember?—the bracelet flew off and the Marqués Muntarian picked it up and gave it back to him. But not before I, standing outside the *palizadas*, had seen with these eyes!”

Throughout this little colloquy Zabalza had been engaged as becomes an attentive husband. He had, after some brief directions to the chauffeur of the car, hired from the best garage in San Silvestro, assisted Madame de Zabalza to descend; he had led the lady up the doorsteps, upon which he had deposited their lightish travelling-valises; and now was engaged in fitting a latch-key, bright with constant chain-wear, into the old and tarnished lock. He had not overheard the words, though they had been spoken loudly, and accompanied by vivacious gestures. But the Señora's beautiful jewelled ears had drunk in every sound. She was very pale as she bowed graciously in return for the salutations offered by the Pressmen, for whose retreat Don Enrique pointedly waited before opening the newly-painted hall-door.

“*Señors,*” thus he addressed them, in soft tones of deprecation and employing terms of almost Oriental politeness, “I could not consent to thrust

my miserable affairs more intrusively upon your notice by inviting you to cross the threshold of this unworthy house. Condescend to put in motion the extremities with which an all-wise Providence has endowed you. Deign to remove your distinguished individualities, for until you do so—this dwelling is without a door!" A moment later, when the pressmen had *de mala gana* conveyed themselves down the cork-tree avenue in the wake of the retreating auto, and were well out of sight, "Enter, Ilona, soul of me!" said Don Enrique, and, picking up the travelling-valises, ushered Madame into the hall.

VII.

The broad carved leaves of the door of beautiful dappled *grenadilla* wood shut heavily behind the couple, and Zabalza securely bolted them before he spoke. And then it was with a changed and nasal tone, hard and harshly consonantal, from which with the first musty whiff of the odours of the long-sealed dwelling, the tripping graces of an acquired French accent had suddenly been blown away.

"This hall typifies my heart," Don Enrique said to Madame. "The labours of painters, bricklayers and scrubbing-women have begun and ended with the exterior. Within all is as death found and left it eighteen years before. See here"—and he pointed to the altar without which no Catholic

house in Donda is held to be complete. The black frontal with the white Cross, that had been hung there for the funeral rites of Abramo by the trembling hands of widowed Donna Teresa, had served less than a fortnight later for her own. The brown wax candles in the tall wooden candlesticks yet remained, though nibbled by mice, the brass thurible tarnished by years of neglect, lay on the right of the shallow wooden steps covered by a dusty black carpet, with a little pile of spilled grey ashes at its lip. The holy water had dried in the font on the left of the door, leaving a few crystals of salt in the dust at the bottom, the ruddy sunset filtering through the dusty hall skylight made a broad pool of crimson on the long-unwaxed parquet. Through this the couple moved to the door at the far end of the vestibule. When it opened to the master's hand, the odour of a dwelling long-sealed was somewhat tempered by the aromatic odour of the tall cabinets of carved camphor-wood ranged about the tapestried walls of dead Teresa's drawing-room, where her work-table stood open, the rusty needle yet in the mildewed embroidery, dropped, it may have been, when Fate's knock sounded on the door. Her portrait and her husband's and that of their son, looked down from tarnished frames upon Zabalza's tragic entrance, and long French windows revealed the glory of the garden, full of tulip-trees and stately palms and rioting roses, and jasmine in prodigal opulence, wreathing the balcony with its

white-blossomed twisting branches, and climbing to the tops of the tallest trees. Here, at the end of a table, was spread a white cloth with covers for two, a decanter of Dondese wine, and some kind of a cold collation, which both sorely needed.

"To the memory of my father and mother, whose portraits look down upon their son," said Zabalza as he filled the glasses. "At the very threshold of revenge upon their crowned murderer." He rose and emptied the glass, and broke it upon the marble hearthstone, where, in recognition of the chills of the evening, wood crackled aromatically in the silvered steel basket, and Ilona Levinski followed his example after touching the wine with her pale lips. "If you would prefer coffee, Mademoiselle," said Don Enrique, when the meal was finished, "it can be supplied you instantly. Empty as it appears, we are not alone in this house. I have had a guest-room prepared for your convenience, and there is a woman, the wife of one of the Revolutionary Brotherhood, who will attend you at your wish. I sleep with my memories, and my hopes, in the bed that was my mother's, where I made my first entrance upon the scene of this world."

"I thank you, Señor Don Enrique, for the consideration you have shown me," said Mademoiselle Levinski as her host pulled a bell-rope, evoking a rusty tinkle in the basement of the house; "but I need no protection, who have braved so many perils side by side with my comrades, nor do I care for

comforts who have existed upon crusts. An Extremist can bear extremes—for a Terrorist there are no terrors.”

“ You treat me as a neophyte still,” said Zabalza, looking gloomily upon her, an enthralling vision in her transparent draperies, tinged with the rose of the dying sunset, illumined by the wax tapers burning in tarnished silver candelabra, whose radiance wakened the fires of her diamonds, and was reflected in her luminous bronze-coloured eyes. “ Your tone is that of the teacher to the student. I am ready to admit that when I demanded of the Extreme Council that you should be my associate in this affair, the passion you inspired in me at the moment of our meeting was the real reason of the request.”

A slight noise behind Don Enrique made him glance over his shoulder towards the doorway. It was only the woman who had been detailed to wait on Mademoiselle, herself the comrade of an Anarchist, who had entered the room with coffee on a tray, which she placed on the table.

“ *Campanero*,” she said, nodding to Zabalza, “ if you need the services of a valet, my José is at hand and will serve you at your need. For the pretty little comrade here I will act as *cameréra*. She will ring when she wants me.” She nodded familiarly to Mademoiselle Levinski and went out of the room.

If a significant glance had been interchanged

between the women, Don Enrique had not observed it. The waitress was to him a nonentity, a mere screw in the vast machine of Anarchical organisation. That she would act as a spy, that within an incredibly short space of time "The Bell" would be made aware that he had sought to dupe the Extreme Council for the attainment of his private wishes, did not occur to him then or thenceafter, when execution of the sentence pronounced upon one who had thus incautiously borne testimony to his own faithlessness followed with such dramatic suddenness.

He went on, folding his arms, and frowning upon Mademoiselle Levinski like a second-rate imitator of Le Bargy in a provincial company :

"You smile, Mademoiselle, unmoved by my frank declaration. Is it because a woman in whose bosom sleeps an automatic revolver—who coils her hair about a poisoned arrow, and carries in her ring a capsule of prussic acid, can have nothing to fear from the passions she provokes?"

Mademoiselle Levinski said coldly :

"A Terrorist has no passions. I quote once more from the Catechism of Anarchy."

"Ah-h-h !" ejaculated Zabalza impatiently.

The lips his eyes were fixed on were narrow and deeply scarlet. They curved a little in scorn or in amusement, and the faint depression of a dimple came and went below the carnation of an oval cheek. She was of that deceptive slenderness so distinctive

of Polish and Hungarian women, her throat and bosom, shoulders and arms and hips, modelled like those of some Tanagra Venus. And yet in her bodily perfection there was nothing sensuous. Rather she suggested a gleaming weapon, wrapped, for the preservation of its delicate, murderous edge, in embroidered silken gauze.

Zabalza went on :

“Have you forgotten the night of our meeting in London? They were not passionless—the lips that kissed my hand!”

Her bronze eyes gleamed as she retorted :

“It was the hand that had saved my father, to achieve fresh triumphs for the Cause. Or I believed so.” A jewel on her bosom scintillated in the candle-light as though a sigh had lifted it, and dulled again as she resumed : “Though you have never yet shown me the scar left by the red-hot bar of iron upon your arm.”

Zabalza exclaimed with a wonderfully convincing accent of relief and surprise mingled :

“*Caramba!* If that is all you require——”

And he pulled up the left sleeve of his thin grey tweed coat, and slipped from a buttonhole of the shirt-cuff one of its shining jewelled buttons, showing a black silk band secured tightly by clip-studs about his wrist. He pulled a corner of the silk, and the studs left their slot-holes. He threw the wristlet into the corner, and thrust under Ilona Levinski's eyes his brown sinewy forearm, disfigured by the

redness of a transverse scar of about two-fingers' width.

"Now! Now—are you convinced? Was doubt of me the barrier between us?"

"If it were, *amigo*," said Mademoiselle with a strange smile that did not melt the ice in her eyes, "the barrier is levelled. But let me hear no more of love—at least until the fulfilment of my mission. I came here to personate your wife, and aid you to carry out your purpose. If I fail you, death by your hand or my own must expiate my fault."

"Yet tell me," entreated Don Enrique, "had the Council been more explicit——? Had your instructions been, let us say, more precisely and clearly detailed——"

The tips of Mademoiselle's slender fingers touched his lips for silence:

"*Señor*," she told him, "I am weary. We will talk to-morrow." To end his greedy kissing of the captured hand she rang the bell, summoned the woman, and followed her upstairs.

Ilona Levinski had passed the night in many stranger lairs than the great carved four-post bed in the high guest-chamber of this long-shut house, with its tarnished mirrors and dusty oil-portraits, its cobwebbed china and moth-eaten drapery.

But after an attempt to sleep, Mademoiselle abandoned the attempt as futile. She was haunted—not by fears of the mice, or of the huge spiders inhabiting the fusty curtains, or by the strange

creaks and cracklings of wood suffering from dry rot or the attacks of the insatiable worm. But by the vision of a right arm.

The right arm of a slender young man with a jutting underlip, a young moustache of sprightly black, a salient nose of the beaky kind, and widely set, brilliant, chestnut-brown eyes. Zabalza and not Zabalza in four words; an hidalgo, whereas the son of Abramo was a tradesman; a grandee of bluest blood, very different from the muddy fluid running in the veins of the King's double, the clown.

This right hand had been thrust one day in the Spring of 1913 over the middle window-bar of a burning compartment of a locked carriage of the derailed fore-half of the Bordeaux-Orleans Express. An alert voice had called to Ilona through the smoke and smother: "Have courage, Mademoiselle! Help is coming. We shall save you! Again—have courage and do not despair!" And the slim young man in the unobtrusive brown tweeds had drawn back the arm in the scorched sleeve and sprung up lightly, had seized a crowbar from a bewildered platelayer, and broken out the iron bar that his hissing blood had cooled. And after Levinski and his daughter had been extricated from the carriage, fresh acts of chivalrous kindness to the forlorn pair—poor Polish emigrants flying from Russian tyranny, to earn the bread of exile in the freer land of France—had cast about that comfortless night at a wayside station between

Angoulême and Poitiers the glamour that made its memory dangerously sweet. The dressing of the burn upon his arm with vaseline from her traveling-bag, which *he* had had the forethought to rescue when he extricated her from the carriage, the sacrifice of a cambric handkerchief, bearing the initial of her name embroidered by herself in her own hair. . . . The meeting of their hands and eyes at parting, the hurried words breathed in her ear: "Dear Mademoiselle, the world is round, our paths may cross once more. It has been the custom in my family for many generations to regard the saving of a human life as imposing a solemn obligation on the saviour. Therefore, if I can again aid or serve you, send me the fellow-handkerchief to this."

Aldobrando had perhaps counted on her recognition of him later as one of the crowned ones of the earth. Or the words had been spoken in mere flourish. . . . Oh, no! she too well remembered their tone and his expression. . . . He was just thirty, and had been married since 1908. And the old man rescued by him from the burning carriage was the maker of the bomb thrown by Alejandro Mayor as the Royal Procession passed along the Calle Riosa, Donda, on his wedding-day.

Were he ever to learn the truth, how would he take it? Probably jesting. Unlike his sullen double, Zabalza, Aldobrando of Donda took life gaily. Those bright brown eyes, those boldly-

curving lips were always smiling. Yes, he would laugh if ever he knew. But Theodor Levinski, even then toiling in his secret laboratory at Warsaw among vials of acids, and cylinders of poisonous gases, crucibles of picrate potash and tubes of fulminate—how would he support the revelation of the truth?

He had not yet seen Zabalza, who had been rightly dubbed "The Mannequin." He believed him on his daughter's assurance to be the man who had saved his life. No suspicion of the fact had ever visited the chemist. But could the venerable Anarchist have known his saviour one of those men to whose removal from the world he dedicated his great faculties . . . had any voice whispered of the weakness of his daughter in hesitating for one moment in the execution of a duty to dwell upon the memory of a certain Spring night. . . .

Ilona saw her father stricken, shattered, never again to recover from the overwhelming shock.

By the light of the gnawed wax tapers on the ebony-and-ivory toilet-table, she looked at the woman reflected in the tarnished mirror, overcame her human weakness and renewed her dreadful vow.

What had Number 11,339, Executive Centre 13, Warsaw, to do with sentimental memories, bonds of gratitude, words uttered, glances exchanged, pledges given or received? Was she not like thousands of comrades bound by the oath upon the

Blade of Grass to the Wheel of Social Revolution—pledged to devote the last drop of blood, the ultimate volt of will-power, the final breath, to the service of the Cause?

She had no faith in Zabalza's ability or determination. She had been disillusioned with regard to him wonderfully soon. Within a week of their meeting in London she had realised him as a nonentity. A man of straw, swayed by a personal hatred, compound of petty jealousy and vanity. As for his mental powers, she estimated them lightly. Would a man of brains had been guilty of the mistake Don Enrique had committed in the location of the burn upon the arm?

The left instead of the right. How fatuous! An Extremist of the genuine type would never have blundered so.

Don Enrique was neither a conspirator nor a lover. Were the King in his place, and he in Aldobrando's, something really original in the way of a plot would have been conceived in the keen brain behind that bulging forehead and those brilliant eyes, and carried out with a smile on the bold curved mouth, so like and yet unlike. . . .

Zabalza's plan, roughly, was as follows. To lure Aldobrando of Donda to the Villa of the Peacock, to intimidate him, once entrapped, by threats of torture or death. To be seized, apparently, with remorse for the crime contemplated; to prevail upon the Royal victim, with tears and prayers if

need be, to change clothes with him, the traitor, and thus disguised (in garments free from the tokens of a bloody struggle) to escape. At the moment of the King's leaving the house a signal was to be given on which Anarchists concealed in the avenue were to assassinate the King.

Later, Zabalza was to return to the Palace in the Royal character, trusting to the marvellous resemblance between himself and his murdered Sovereign to delay the moment of discovery as long as possible. The safes, cabinets and desks in Aldobrando's private workroom were to be ransacked. State documents were to be torn up, others secured, with all the valuables obtainable, for theft, like murder, is laudable if it further and enrich the Cause.

Having achieved this *coup* Zabalza was to escape under cover of a visit to a Royal shooting-box in the mountains, and by devious routes well-known rejoin the Extremists at their centre.

The weak point of the plot, so deceiving in its cleverness, was clear to Mademoiselle. Aldobrando would never be coerced or intimidated. . . . Nor would the King be tempted to the Villa of the Peacock by any gaudy, common lure Zabalza's wit could frame! On the other hand . . .

"*The handkerchief—the handkerchief will bring him!*"

A low cry escaped Levinski's daughter as the thought flashed through her mind. She had with

her a handkerchief exactly like *that other*. Marked with a single initial in hair—the hair her own.

Strange bait to catch the Master of Seven Orders of Chivalry, the common cambric handkerchief of a Polish emigrant girl. But he had saved the girl's life and that of her father. And the tradition of his royal family, since a King of Donda had risked his life for a Moorish slave in the twelfth century, was that so great a service rendered, constituted a lifelong claim upon the deliverer. And yet again—he was Aldobrando II. That being said, there is no more to say.

VIII.

On the morning of the following day—that of the match at *raqueta*, the last day of the Mannequin's ineffectual earthly career—Mademoiselle Levinski was allowed another peep at the interior mechanism of Fate's poor puppet. He designed her after all for a part in the tragi-comedy. She was, with the charms Don Enrique found irresistible, to play the part of the bit of cheese in the mouse-trap set to catch the King.

But with the Othello-like reservation :

“Never once is that crowned reptile to touch his lips to your lovely cheek ! I am above all *pundonoroso*. Understand—you are mine ! I have set upon your person the seal of my choice. When I have accomplished this great act of retribution—exactd the vengeance due to me for the lives of my

parents—for my own life, blighted by his tyranny, I intend that you shall become my wife.”

“If the Supreme Council command it I shall certainly obey the order. But until I receive it——” She measured off the fortieth of an inch upon a small and beautifully-manicured thumb-nail. He perfectly understood.

The day of the match was perfection. America had suffocated, Paris was blistering, London was gasping in the fervour of the heat-wave in which the Dondese played like salamanders. The Old Town in all its grades had mustered round the *raqueta* courts. *Toréros*, their *amigas* and their families, rubbed shoulders with the brown fisher-folk of the Puerta and the sturdy people of the Market. Well-to-do tradesfolk were mixed up with the tag-rag and bobtail of the bull-ring, the theatres, the baths and the Grand Casino, and shoulder-blanketed peasants from mountain villages, stocky infantry soldiers in striped flannel trousers, cadets in peaked *képis*, and sallow pupils from the religious seminaries, made the crush more portentous and swelled the babel of voices into a thunderous roar. All the grand stands in the Club grounds were crowded to suffocation. Judge of the piquancy of the expected sensation. The King and Queen were to be present to see El Mozo play. You will not have forgotten Don Enrique’s ancient nickname. You can conceive it tossed backwards and forwards under the white-hot summer sunshine,

over the close-packed heads. It was written in the Book of Fate that Zabalza should have his hour, and be somewhat in the mouths of men before the curtain fell.

And indeed it was a great match greatly played and lost and won for the Old Town, under the fierce sun that beat down upon the courts of snow-white sand.

Seats had been reserved in the judge's enclosure for the Royal pair, but they did not arrive until five o'clock, when the players had maintained a fierce struggle for nearly two hours. Judge if Zabalza's hate of Aldobrando II. was not fanned to fresh flame, when in the third set, played at a great pace by El Mozo, who had finished off many long rallies with daring volleys, and taken the breath of the spectators with matchless *raqueta*, the band crashed into the National Anthem, and a general rise and bustle attending the Royal entrance, distracted him to the advantage of the nobles' champion. But in the fourth set he recovered, took service from 30, and the *tarja* given by the King.

And as the sunset flushed the west with mingled crimson and gold like melted ruby and amber, and the evening star displayed its diamond splendours over the silvery point of the lighthouse on the summit of Monte Ceralda, the Old Town, drunk with the triumph of Don Enrique, lifted him high upon their shoulders, shouting :

"El Mozo! Viva El Mozo! . . . Vitor! Vitor!"

As the crowd, surging round the *raqueta* ground, echoed the shout, the gates of the Royal private carriage-way were thrown open, and a half-squadron of *guardias civiles*, magnificently mounted, their black uniforms new, their lancer-like black leather schapkas shining like ebony, charged the crowd that congested the outer thoroughfare. Oaths and exclamations, bursts of laughter and angry curses, *carambas* and *carajos* mingled with appeals to Heaven and the Saints, went up from throats of every degree, citizens and mudlarks, fisher-folk and soldiers, strangers and *habitués* were jammed by the sudden charge of the *civiles* against the iron railings on either side of the roadway, as a Royal escort of the bodyguard, big moustached men with silver white-plumed helmets, whose swallow-tailed blue coats were plastroned and cuffed with gold-laced crimson, galloped through the lane hedged by all these crushed and hustled bodies, their long straight sabres clattering against their stirrup-irons, their bridles jingling as they kept pace with, and surrounded, the richly decorated open landau in which sat Aldobrando II. and his Queen.

They had risen to depart in the moment of triumph, leaving the *tarja* to be presented by the head of the *Ayuntamiento*, or the Military Governor, perhaps by an *attaché*—the devil knew which!

At the instant of his triumph El Mozo had been slighted. The departure of the royal pair seemed to him the last drop of gall in the goblet, the final turn of the poignard in the wound. Muscular, bright-eyed, swarthily-handsome in his thin white flannels and open-breasted silk shirt, he had carried the suffrages of the ladies by his grace, his skill, his manly beauty, and the marvellous likeness to the King that the pointed beard toned down.

Their eyes met as the royal equipage rolled by between its moving lines of armed men on cantering horses. Aldobrando turned his long chin slightly in his stiff military collar, and let his bold and brilliant eyes rest for an instant on the face of Don Enrique, who, standing erect upon the shoulders of two of the brawniest Old Towners, folded his arms upon his broad breast and returned that slighting look of indifference, with eyes darting fires of deadly hatred and rage.

Next instant, with a slight lifting of his strongly-marked black eyebrows, the faintest twitch of his jutting under-lip, Aldobrando II. was gone. Don Enrique saw red—suffered an instant's choking and vertigo, lost his balance and fell from the shoulders of his supporters, striking his head against an iron mallet used in driving the iron posts of the net barrier. A lady screamed, there was a susurrant of excitement amongst the throng; it was said that the distinguished player was fatally injured—even hinted that he was dead.

At any rate there was no presentation of the King's *tarja*. The winner, in a state of insensibility, real or apparent, was carried to his dressing-room. The Club surgeon was called in. The injured man was let blood, bandaged, bathed, stimulated and subsequently conveyed, in the care of Madame Zabalza, who appeared distracted, to his home.

IX.

The Crowned Powers of the earth do not commonly receive parcels or even letters unopened, saving such as are known to emanate from sources indisputably safe. But the system of intelligence maintained by Social Revolution is so well organised, so well concealed, and so far-reaching, that the placing of an envelope in a conspicuous position upon the blotting-pad in Aldobrando's work-room late upon the following evening, did not present a baffling problem to Mademoiselle.

The letter, written in a small and elegant feminine hand in violet ink on pale green paper, with the device of a peacock stamped in silver above the single initial "I," ran thus :

"TO THE KING'S MOST SUBLIME MAJESTY.

"Sire,—In the silence of the night I write this, sitting by the couch of my unhappy husband, Don Enrique Zabalza, whom the displeasure of your Majesty has smitten as by a stroke from the sky. Be merciful, my King! Remove the doubts,

lighten the fears, heal the wounds of the unhappy sufferer who raves in delirium beneath the roof that has not sheltered the exile for years.

"Sire, in the hour of peril the hand of my King snatched me,—and one whose life is dearer to me than my own,—from the danger of a dreadful death. The scar your Majesty carries on the inner side of your right arm between the wrist and elbow is my witness. Ah! by the memory of that magical night under the stars of France, and the voice that bade me call without fear upon my chivalrous preserver to succour me yet again, should need arise—I entreat your Majesty to pity me. Alas! I can write no more. This paper, the token I place within the envelope—are wetted with blinding tears."

The signature was the initial "I." The cambric handkerchief enclosed within the envelope, bearing a similar initial embroidered in hair, exhaled an agreeable perfume of heliotrope and possessed a suggestive dampness. The King sniffed the perfume cautiously, and, unlocking a green dispatch-box bearing his private cypher, produced a similar handkerchief, with an initial "I" in hair. Then he pulled back the sleeve of his smoking-coat and unfastened the bracelet of four gold curb-chains concealing the scar of the red-hot carriage-bar from curious or unsympathetic eyes. Subsequently he leaned back, lighted another cigarette and smoked it slowly and thoughtfully. Finally he shrugged

and got up, rang for his confidential valet, and passed into an adjoining room. . . .

Very soon a tall slight man, wrapped in a dark military *capa*, emerged from a postern at the side of the palace communicating with the quarters of the equerries. He descended a flight of stone steps and crossed a courtyard, gave "*Donda*" in answer to the sentinel's "*Quien sabe?*" exchanged "*Paisano*" for "*Que gente?*" added the password of the night, which happened to be "Silence!" and was in the by-streets of the Alameda, which separates the Parte Nueva from the Old Town, in the blinking of an eye.

The Villa of the Peacock stood on the town-edge of the suburbs. Not a light shone in its windows as the pedestrian passed up the avenue of cork-trees, paused at the bottom of the steps and looked up at the north front of the house, dreaming in the silver moonlight behind its shuttered windows. But as his light foot touched the stone a faint gleam shone through the fanlight above the door. The door opened on the chain. A feminine voice whispered :

"*Quien es?*"

"*Gente de paz,*" Aldobrando responded. The chain fell, the doors swung inward. The King of Donda stepped into the hall. And the unseen sinister beings who had watched him, and dogged his footsteps, knew that part of the design was accomplished.

It was to transpire later how the woman who had unchained the hall-door and who was covered from head to foot with a black *mantilla*, took—with a beautiful hand, Aldobrando noticed—a lantern from the slab of marble below a vast tarnished mirror and silently motioned the King to precede her, throwing the beam on before. They ascended a stair of a dozen steps leading from the hall to a short gallery. The woman pointed to a door. The King knocked, opened it, went in and saw in a large room illuminated by candles a man lying in a big bed under a heavy carved *baldaquin*. And the man had the King's face, though the skin of his chin and jaws showed pale whence a beard had recently been shaven. The man had been intently watching the door, and when it opened and his double entered, such hell-fires blazed in his eyes that the King at once understood the situation.

At last they had trapped him. His charming Polish exile had played into the hands of assassins. But until the revolver-shot ended all, or until the dagger-stroke pierced the vulnerable spot situated above the clavicle, Aldobrando asked nothing better than to play the game like a King. His eyebrows arched in their inimitably quizzical fashion. He said, with that well-known outward thrust of his jutting under-lip :

“Don Enrique Zabalza, it greatly gratifies me to observe that the natural tenderness of your wife has exaggerated the gravity of your condition.

You are neither delirious nor moribund from the results of your somersault. *Muy Señor mio*, I perceive that you are fully attired under those coverings. Give yourself the trouble to rise from your bed."

Those intolerable eyes. That jutting mouth! That jesting tone of raillery. A nerve-storm swept through the being of the other. His distorted face, with its almost idiotic grin, and the blobs of foam at the corners of the mouth, lost for the moment all resemblance to the King's. He leaped up, throwing off the heavily-embroidered counterpane, showing himself fully dressed, *sans* coat, collar and cravat.

"You—you—O!—you—pitiless murderer!—tyrant!—whose order banished me my country—forbade me to dwell in the home of my parents—even to shed a tear upon their tomb. . . . What can you expect from me, now that I have you at my mercy? And yet you gibe—you can laugh in my face! Will you laugh when I tell you that this house is surrounded, that you are a prisoner in the hands of the Sons of Anarchy?"

"*Muy Señor mio*," answered the King, "when I entered this apartment and saw a fully-dressed man in the bed, I knew what that implied."

And, coolly throwing off his military cloak, the King took a chair and placed it against the wainscot so as to command the single door. Then he sat down, continuing pleasantly :

"I presume you propose to despatch me after some original fashion. Well, let me relieve the apprehensions I read in your face. I have neither dagger, nor revolver, nor poison upon my person. Nothing but a cigarette-case and a match-box, which I now produce, as it occurs to me that a man who is about to die may just as well smoke!"

X.

The speaker selected a cigarette and lighted it with unperturbed appreciation, then crossing his legs, leaned back and continued exhaling a column of fragrant smoke into the close air of the room.

"You observe that I take the situation calmly. Why should I not, *Señor Mio*? My affairs, both private and State, are in order. I have an heir, and"—the King's lip twitched—"a wife whom I can trust. My religious duties have been duly fulfilled—for the offences I have committed against Heaven and my fellow-men I have done my best to atone by penance and alms-giving. For such sins as still are set down against me in the Book of the Recording Angel, I leave them to the mercy of Him in Whom alone I trust! Speaking of angels" added Aldobrando II. with something in his brilliant eye approaching to a twinkle, "it is to Madame de Zabalza, your wife, that the credit of my capture is due. When I reflect that in assist-

ing her to escape from the wreck of a burning railway carriage I facilitated my own violent and premature demise—I am tempted to laugh again!”

“And will you laugh?” demanded Don Enrique. “Will you laugh when I tell you that although for this moment of my vengeance I have waited fifteen years, I am tempted at the moment when the goblet is at my lips almost to pity you!” He struck himself upon the breast. “That something here relents towards the image of myself. That I would undo what I have done were it now possible. Tell me, my enemy, do you believe this?”

“*Muy Señor mio*,” said Aldobrando, smiling coldly, “though I consider myself fairly well documented on the subject of Anarchism, I have never yet heard of an Extremist of the relenting type. Nor, with your leave, do I believe in your Quixotic sentiments.” Sudden anger clanged in his voice as he threw away the cigarette-end. “*Nombre de Dios!* Finish your work! I am waiting—do you hear? What! Must I stir your sluggish blood with insults? Well then, listen! *Pués si!* For no reason were you exiled from Dondese soil but that you might serve me elsewhere. Poor scapegoat! When I was a boy of eleven I used the extraordinary likeness between me, Aldobrando of Donda, and the sardine merchant’s son as cover for—how many forbidden *escapadas!* My guardian angel, my patron Saints S. Aldobrand of Vintara and S. Pedro of Calamaria

were kept uncommonly busy, let me tell you, my poor double, by the frolics I enjoyed. *Hombre!* haven't I been stealing apples and almonds and figs from the gardens of the Franciscan Fathers, or yelling on the sunny side of the bull-ring with other little blackguards, or on all-night fishing excursions with the *pescadors* of the *puerto*, catching conger-eel and squid and mullet, in *your* character, drinking coffee boiled on a *brasero*, and eating raw ham and garlic sandwiches that were meant for you, whilst the lights were burning in the royal apartments at the palace, and my tutors and governors were running about like distracted emmets—and the Queen Mother and my aunts were tearing their hair! And when I got older, what stolen sweets have I not crunched with *your* teeth, *Señor*, my simulacrum—what stolen kisses have I not— No, *por Dios!* I always took care to pay the kisses back! Ha! does not that drive the dart into your thick hide and send the blood to your weak brain, you bleating calf, you strutting peacock?"

Zabalza ground his teeth. He got in—the King being compelled to get his second wind :

"*Señor*, in spite of these insults, I pledge my soul that Your Majesty shall leave this house unharmed and in safety. If I entertained designs against your person, I abandon them now. I swear it on the sacred head of Your Majesty! But it is necessary that you should change clothes with me. Quick, take off that uniform!"

For the King was wearing the undress of a general of his infantry, with a *brochette* of many decorations on the tunic, and the Star of the Order of S. Pedro of Calamaria. He flatly refused to comply with this demand of Zabalza's, shouting :

"No! by a thousand devils! I will keep my clothes and my person inviolate from defilement by any contact with *canaille* like you! . . . Idiot, you may even now shoot or stun me and dress in my uniform and—if such is your crazy purpose—attempt to enter the palace in my stead! But without the *consigne*—even the King of Donda could not pass the sentries. Booby! Blunderhead!—you that call yourself a conspirator! Do you imagine even for a moment that you are worthy to personate the King? Well, then," cried Aldo-brando, suddenly seized by a brilliant inspiration, "what is to prevent you? We *have* changed clothes. You are the King!"

And the King shouted with angry laughter, strange mirth which must have sounded oddly on the ears of the Anarchists waiting the prearranged signal in the lower apartments.

Then the door opened in the midst of the King's laughter. Mademoiselle Levinski stood upon the threshold, beautiful, icy, and implacable, like Fate in a mantilla. The prearranged signal had not been given, but Zabalza turned to her with ill-disguised eagerness. Nonplussed by the sudden-

ness of Aldobrando's *volte-face*, he was ready to follow the councils of the cooler, keener brain.

"You—you heard what this madman——" he could hardly articulate. "He will not believe that he jests in the face of Death. He pretends that——"

He broke off, for Mademoiselle Levinski's glance coldly ignored him. She said, looking over his shoulder at the King :

"All is well, then, comrade? His Majesty has availed himself of the alternative you suggested! This being so, it is time for him to leave. You will accompany him to the stairhead and bid him farewell in the prearranged formula : '*Muy Señor mio, may your errand prosper. Depart with God!*'"

A sound that was compound of a sob and a groan broke from Zabalza. His eyes blazed and his face was dabbled with sweat. Through the confused noises in his ears he heard his own voice saying to the Extremists :

"Comrades, I take it all upon my shoulders. Everything is arranged—nothing can possibly go wrong. I lure the King to the Villa of the Peacock. The special means I use are secret and my own affair. You, presently, will hear high words passing between us. He will upbraid me—I shall seem to relent! . . . Seized with contrition I then shall warn him : '*Men are in ambush without this house to assassinate Your Majesty! Deign to change clothes with me. Leave the house in my character. All will be well if Your Majesty assents to this.*'"

“And Aldobrando will agree to the exchange? You are certain?” they had asked him. Zabalza had replied :

“I will give you a sign by which you may know that the *ruse* has succeeded. When *he* is on the point of leaving the house you will hear me say—speaking in *his* character!—‘*Muy Señor mio*, may your errand prosper! Depart with God!’ Then you will do your part, but it will not be the King of Donda who will fall pierced by the little winged and venomed messengers—only the Mannequin, who has been killed in error. The King escapes—by a miracle! The King returns to the Palace!”

But, as one preordained to be through life Destiny’s pantaloons, Zabalza had omitted to take into consideration the inflexible courage of the King of Donda, his keenness of perception, and that trifling detail of the pass. Last, and worst of all, the possibility of betrayal on the part of Mademoiselle Levinski, now driven to final choice between her comrade and her love. No wonder the poor wretch turned livid, tore at his collar, and finally fell upon his knees, appealing alternately to the King’s mercy and the lady’s, pouring forth a flood of incoherent sentences, threats perhaps, mingled with prayers.

Then, suddenly, his Atropos decided. The shears clicked, and the severed ends fell.

“Rise up,” she said to Don Enrique, and, as the unstrung wretch obeyed her, she took a tweed

overcoat from a chair near the bed-head and held it for him to put on. She wrapped a white scarf about his pithless neck, pulled up the coat-collar, buttoned the garment, crowned its wearer with a light felt deerstalker, and saw her work well done. "Comrade," she said, addressing Aldobrando, who had watched her with intentness, "nothing remains for you now to do but to accompany His Majesty to the head of the stairs. As I open the hall-door say in a loud voice: '*Muy Señor mio*, may your errand prosper. Depart with God!'"

She took Zabalza by the hand and led him, unresisting, out of the great gloomy bed-chamber. He went as uncomplainingly as a sheep goes to the butcher's yard. He made no effort to escape, a deadly stupor weighed upon his faculties. His hour was on Don Enrique, crushing out all hope. His head hung drooping towards his breast as he went down the short staircase—with a gait and bearing very unlike the King's. The chain of the hall-door fell. The doors swung open. To the King, looking down from the dusky stair-head, the black mouth of the cork-tree avenue seemed yawning to swallow the figure to whom he called:

"*Muy Señor mio*, may your errand prosper. Depart with God!"

Zabalza gave no sign that he heard. He went heavily down the steps and was gulped by the jaws of the avenue; from every side came curious, spitting sounds.

Then, as the hall-door softly shut and the chain was put in place again, a shrill, strange, terrible cry came up from the dark avenue to the King at the top of the stair. The outcry was followed by no others, but by the sound of unsteady running footsteps, uneven, broken by pauses and dull thuds as though the runner, bewildered by the darkness or seized with sudden panic, were knocking against the boles of the trees. But suddenly all was still.

It was getting towards three o'clock in the morning. Already the sky was grey behind the mass of Monte Ajulia. Soon her crest would be tipped with golden fire: the violet shadows would lift from the jade-green Bahia, as the slumberous earth heavily rolled over to meet the morning kisses of the sun.

"Your Majesty looks fatigued," ventured Mademoiselle Levinski. "Dare I offer a cup of coffee?"

"A thousand thanks, *Señora!*" Aldobrando II. returned, smiling somewhat cynically, "but I infinitely prefer to break my fast at home."

He threw on the military cloak Mademoiselle now brought and tendered him, and topped himself with the peaked undress cap, adding:

"I presume I am free to follow the gentleman who has preceded me?"

Mademoiselle Levinski answered enigmatically:

"May Heaven bestow a longer life than his upon Your Majesty."

"*Caramba!*" exclaimed Aldobrando. "You mean that the man has been murdered?" He added, as Mademoiselle bent her head in assent: "Can it be possible that poor devil has met the end designed for me? . . . And by what means . . . if I am not too curious?"

Mademoiselle Levinski replied calmly:

"The persons concealed behind the trees of the *avenida* employed air-guns with poisoned darts!"

"Upon my life!" exclaimed the King, "you take the loss of your husband with extraordinary phlegm!"

"A true Terrorist takes everything coolly," returned Mademoiselle Levinski, quoting, it may be, from the Catechism of Anarchy. "Besides, that poor *saltimbanque* was neither my husband nor my lover. Now let me beg Your Majesty to depart from here at once, keeping the collar of your mantle turned up so as to conceal the complexion of your chin."

"I comprehend. I am returning to the Palace in the character of my poor double. That dead man lying somewhere in the avenue is supposed," said Aldobrando II., "to be the King. As to departing, I assure you I shall do so with alacrity. But as regards yourself, Mademoiselle?"

"Think nothing of me," she answered quickly. "I am in no danger—and it will soon be broad daylight. What is this you wish me to take?"

For the King, with his well-known grace, had

produced, and now extended to the lady, a somewhat bulky envelope containing two cambric handkerchiefs beautifully marked in hair.

"One of them has been in my possession for nearly six years. The other I received last evening. Permit me to return them," said the King, "and to place myself at your feet. *Adios, Señorita!*"

"*Adieu, Monseigneur,*" said Mademoiselle with her clear eyes on Aldobrando's. "I have paid my debt to Your Majesty. Nothing now remains but to settle my account with the master of this house and depart."

As Aldobrando passed down the avenue he halted for an instant. The roses had been refreshed by dew, the mellow light of early day bathed the world in exquisite beauty, doves cooed and nightingales were singing in the ilex-oaks, a cool breeze sighed from the Bahia, and gossamer webs floated in the golden atmosphere. You would have deemed the man who lay at the foot of a tree in a strangely huddled attitude, some wine-bibber of the town, sleeping off the effects of a debauch. That is, until you bent closely over him and noted the blackish discoloration of the distorted face, and the hands that clutched the soil.

"The master of the house sleeps late," said the King, glancing back at the shuttered Villa. "Mademoiselle, if she waits to settle her account,

must indefinitely postpone her departure. *Sapristi!* what was that?"

A revolver-shot rang sharply out within the Villa of the Peacock. The King glanced back, then altered his mind and strode swiftly on.

THE FORMULA OF BRANTIN.

I.

THIS is the story of the New York doctor who died at Kellerbusch's Farm, and of the wonderful legacy that broken sinner left to another man, in trust for Heaven.

He was in the final stage of phthisis when Allan Armitage, recently graduate of the Missionary College of Holybourne, Werkshire, and himself a cough-racked, hollow-eyed victim of pulmonary disease, came across him. Does the creature's real name matter? Perhaps! At any rate he passed at Kellerbusch's under the alias of Brantin. He had been a fashionable quack physician in New York, and had fattened upon the folly of women patients and the vicious appetites of men, and flourished and decayed, falling himself into degraded habits, and so drifted, by way of San Francisco and Puerto Rico and Madeira, coughing up his remaining lung bit by bit as he went, out to Cape Colony, and from thence to the Transvaal. In Johannesburg, 6,000 feet above sea level, thanks to the clear atmosphere, and in despite of dust-storms, he had picked up and made money, plying

his old vile trade. And then he made the great discovery that crowned his knavish life, before he ended it at Kellerbusch's Sanatorium.

Kellerbusch was a Field-Cornet and an utterly respectable man, who dealt not only in district justice, but in market-garden produce for which city customers were willing to pay the price. His vegetable-gardens lay up along the Pleizierreis Valley way, his farmhouse, a building of the old Colonial pattern, was shaded by patriarchal blue-gum trees. What more natural than to advertise the place in the *Star* and other papers as a first-class health-resort for pulmonary sufferers? A brother of his wife's, who was a *doktor* and lived at Pretoria, and had never seen the estate in question, supplied Kellerbusch with the necessary certificates about purity of water and healthfulness of situation; and testified in glowing sentences to the curative properties of fresh goats' milk, perennially flowing in Kellerbusch's Land of Promise. Kellerbusch described the scenery himself in language that came little short of the poetic, and fixed the tariff temptingly low.

The lying advertisement and the false certificate caught Brantin the rogue, and Armitage the honest man, both sick to death, one actually dying. Possibly the nourishing milk of the curative goat might have done them good—if they could have caught the too nimble dairy, skipping among the hill-tops in untrammelled freedom. Being too weak, Allan Armitage and his fellow-patient looked at the

goats instead. This was the treatment by day; and a single room with two beds in it having been assigned them—for how can two men who have got the same sickness take hurt from each other? asked the reasonable Kellerbusch—at night, they could pursue other quarry even more active than the elusive goat.

They might have loaded Kellerbusch with deserved reproach and left the *plaats*, but three or four days of the diet had done wonders in the way of reducing their strength. They stayed because they were too weak to move. There was a little old Boer *meid* in a flapping *kappje*, who, twice a day, cooked and set forth untempting meals in the public *eetkamer*, as the stuffy front parlour had been imaginatively christened by Kellerbusch. But she was unmarried, and carry food to an Engelschmann or an Amerikaan in bed, that she would not, not for the Predikant! She knew what lustful devils were the *rooineks*, and if no honest Boer came forward in time, and she was not so old yet, the Lord be thanked!—then she would die a virgin, and ask Him what He made her for?

The Kaffirs about the farm were insolent and filthy, no help could be got from them; and the overseer, Kellerbusch's nephew, spoke only the Taal, and was a surly brute. So Allan Armitage, who could just crawl, became servant and nurse to his fellow-patient in this precious sanatorium, and, later on, Missionary.

He lay in bed—the other patient—an ugly,

squalid, ghastly spectacle. In his New York days of opulence he had paid Japanese artists of eminence in the under-world of vice, to cover him with tattooing; and the monstrous things that twined and sprawled and girmed upon his emaciated limbs and wasted body might have been the legion of devils that possessed him, breaking out of their fast-crumbling prison, so hideous and obscene were they. He cursed the Kellerbusch swindle freely—and many other things besides. He swore at the meek aspirant to the martyr's palm, and ordered him about by day. But in the long, slow watches of the night, when the grizzly hairs of the decaying sinner's head bristled under the shadow of the sword that would fall so soon, Brantin would sit up, bathed in sweat and holding a blood-stained towel to his mouth, and, craning his livid head forward over his fleshless knees, would listen greedily as the Englishman prayed for him.

"I guess it isn't much use," he would say. "I've lost my last hunch in this blamed game of life. I'm busted—right out, for this world—and the next!" His mouth twisted in a shudder, he wrung it back into a smile. "But maybe the Big Boss Above would let up on me a bit—in the matter of time, if a sucker like you keeps on asking!"

Even as he hoped, the wretch's last sands were dancing out of the glass. He was never to get back to New York and realise the colossal fortune that was to be made in Dopeland out of his great

discovery. He had a son who had graduated at Harvard and was now conductor of a Broadway electric street-car. And he had a daughter, educated at a fashionable women's college, who was a sales-lady. And he had meant to do the liberal thing by them, sir ! when the pile was made. . . .

He babbled of the Great Discovery and the condemned idiots who had made light of it and cast him out. These were a group of prominent citizens in Johannesburg, persons of divers nationalities forming a syndicate for the importation of a certain kind of living merchandise in every shade of human colour, from the pallid London work-girl and the red-cheeked wench from the Home Counties, to the brunette Frenchwoman, the florid German, the olive Italian, the swart Spaniard, the dusky Hindoo, the amber-skinned Japanese and the slant-eyed Chinawoman, primrose yellow under half an inch of rice powder laid on white of egg.

The members of the Syndicate,—some of them being solid burghers with voices in the Raad, and others wealthy Uitlanders of variegated nationalities, and considerable interests among the towering chimneys and roaring dumps of the Rand,—were all men of eminent respectability. Like their British brother, Mr. Jones of London, who owns that dingy row of muslin-curtained, furtive-fronted houses nearly opposite the Barracks in North-West Street, where painted harridans in soiled pink dressing-gowns leer between the greasy slats of the decrepit

Venetian blinds; and their near relative, Mr. Brown of New York, who is landlord of those imposing drab stone-fronted houses on Nine-Thousandth Street; and the other man, also an exemplary citizen, and a pillar of public morality, who runs the principal night-houses in Chicago, each strove to be a shining light and an example to his neighbour. Each attended his place of worship regularly with his family, subscribed handsomely to local charities, and loudly bemoaned the yearly increase in the number of the "stiffs" and the "rowdies" who by their immoral conduct in loafing all day on Post Office Corner, and their habit of living on tobacco and drink and loose women, degraded and lowered the tone of the town.

An ill-paved, ill-lighted, abominably-drained and insufficiently-watered town, at that period, some years before the South African War of 1900, where education, except in the Boer Taal, was forbidden above the third standard, that Oom Paul's young burghers might not learn English, that language regarded as the original tongue of the inhabitants of Sodom, and the other destroyed Cities of the Plain.

These enlightened citizens, then, intent upon the laying up of treasure, earthly as well as celestial, were sorely exercised about the large percentage of deaths among their live-stock. The merchandise usually came into the Transvaal via Durban and Delagoa Bay, using the railway in the first instance

and the trek-waggon in the second. And though the profits accruing from the business were very large indeed, the expenses were considerable. The Netherlands Company, owning all the railroads in the Transvaal, charged heavy rates, and the imported goods were perishable. The average life of the 'bus-horse, superseded now by the hooting petrol steed, used to be calculated at three years. According to statisticians, the white-slave imported to the Colonies lasts about the same length of time. But there these honest speculators, German, Dutch, English, and Oriental, had left too wide a margin upon the credit side of life.

For drink, in that highly rarefied atmosphere, does not merely stupefy. It maddens. And *sans* liquor, the women of François Villon's "sad liberal sisterhood" cannot ply their trade. But for alcohol and drugs, their wretched life would be impossible. Therefore delirium-tremens raged, a veritable epidemic, among the occupants of the houses run by the Syndicate, carrying profits away upon the leathery wings of a phenomenal mortality. Here came in the Great Discovery of the man who was dying at Kellerbusch's Sanatorium. For this poor wretch, doomed throughout life to exercise God-given capacity, and employ hard-won knowledge in the service of Hell, had occupied the salaried post of resident physician to the establishments run by the Syndicate. And chief among the numberless nameless duties involved was the

treatment of patients suffering from the results of the "Jag."

"It was great practice," Brantin coughed out—"just great! You don't suppose a man needed to creep round cautiously, dropping out bromide of potassium and chloral hydrate, such as you'd prescribe for a New York Society woman who'd been drinking champagne and whisky right on end through the season, and sent for you because she'd got to seeing queer things in the corners of her room when she went to bed of a morning! No more than you'd squirt water out of a single hydrant at a sky-scraper newspaper-office-building, with an incendiary petroleum-fire raging up the elevator-shaft. Hell, no! It would be an affair of nine twelve-inch hydrants, and 800 feet of hose, and half a dozen motor-pumps at each station, working to supply pressure for eighteen thousand gallons *per* minute, so that when you turned on the stream you'd have an Eiffel Tower of salt water sheer out of East River or the Bay, roaring up twenty storeys and plunking down through the roof."

He mopped the sweat off his livid face and panted awhile, and went on: "Why, I've given eight-grain doses of strychnine in chloric ether to fix up a girl that had got the crazy shakes and gone all to pieces—right for the evening! I've taken another in blue collapse—spasmodic asthma and cardiac failure with complications—and drenched

her with thirty minims of hydrocyanic in H_2O , and seen her perk up and reach out for her paints, and go out dressed like a star actress to supper at Ryan's within an hour. Of course I made some mistakes"—Armitage shuddered at his grin—"but nobody cut up nasty or asked questions—there. And so . . ."

He left off to strive with the resistless power that was rending soul and body apart. His lean ribs and hollow chest were racked with the throes of coughing. His legs jerked and his hair bristled so that the bleached scalp showed through the degraded black-grey hair-stubble. He panted out at last :

"And so I had my inspiration ! . . . There's a chloride of a metal, common enough in the quartz reef about Johannesburg, that men of science knew a long time ago to possess properties neutralizing the effects of alcohol upon the human or the brute system. But none of 'em, I guess, ever went so far as me ! I combined with another chloride, less known, and used the two in solution, not only administering them internally, but giving hypodermic injections and using the soaked electrical pad. Well, I'm not a man easy to surprise, but the results I registered in cases of alcoholic insanity and alkaloid poisoning were astonishing ! The women—drunkards and druggards—the worst cases I could pick—were cured in seven days. And the Committee came around and thanked me. Saw their way to increased profits and lessened ex-

penses, and raised my salary and voted me a piece of plate. And I got windy and bloated with a new idea. The notion of rendering the women immune, for at least a term of years, against the effects of alcohol and the alkaloids by saturating the system with my chlorides in solution. I'd inoculated half the herd before I found out what I'd done!"

There was a vital interest about the horrible recital that had riveted the attention of his fellow-sufferer. The Reverend Allan Armitage, sitting gaunt and haggard upon his own comfortless cot, asked :

"What had you done?" and loathed himself for that thrill of curiosity.

"Done!" echoed the livid, gasping creature upon the other bed. "Something in your line, Sucker—without meaning it! Because those blasted women, when they found they couldn't drink or drug any more, they stampeded, committed suicide or got religion, and quit out. And Dunch, the boss who managed the houses, reported me to the Syndicate, and the Syndicate gave me the shake, and here I am!"

Seized by one of his sudden despairing rages, he shrieked the words out, brandishing a skeleton fist.

"Hauled up for good in this God-damned place!—broke and dying like a worn out hobo at a barn-side, going out of life like a beggar, and with millions of dollars lying here!"

He dragged out a worn black leather-strapped pocket-book from under the soiled pillow and shook it furiously at Armitage.

"Here, in my Discovery!"

He had an attack of suffocation here, so alarming that Armitage staggered over to hold his head up.

"Do you want to kill yourself, man?" he cried. For Brantin's hæmorrhage had broken forth again, soaking the sufferer's unclean pyjama-jacket and dabbling the coarse yellowish sheet, and every fresh throe brought it pumping from the ruptured artery in clear, bright jets.

"I reckon—all the killing's done—already," Brantin whispered. He lay quiet and exhausted a while longer, the fever of disease and the fever of frustrated ambition burning one against the other in his blood. And then he began again:

"A little time—a little longer time—that was all I asked them, the cursed brutes, the blasted fools! Is every discovery complete at first? Hasn't Pasteur owned a serum imperfect, and set to work afresh, and never rested until he had got what he set out to get, and something more? My discovery cures alcoholic nerve-inflammation and alkaloid neuritis; the foaming, gnashing, yelling drink or drug-maniac, strapped on the bed, becomes a sane man or a sane woman again. But with the hatred for the stuff,—the loathing of it that resulted in ruin for the discoverer,—that made the Syndicate tell me to take my Formula to the

Church Temperance Societies, or to Hell, and kick me out into the gutter. Ah, but wait! A little time to live and make some fresh experiments, and they shall see. Whisper, Sucker, this isn't a thing to be said too loud—the next combination of chlorides will cure, and leave the appetite for alcohol or morphia unaltered! Isn't that great? My new race of drunkards and druggards will be immune against the poison—given ability to indulge their crave to the top of their bent, while remaining outwardly sane, temperate human beings. Isn't that colossal? Isn't that a notion most too big to be covered by one man's brainpan? Think how they'll hand over their wads for my Second Formula, administered hypodermically and by the electric battery, at my Head Centre for the Treatment, by men sworn to secrecy and paid to keep their knowledge to themselves! Think of me grown richer than Vanderbilt or Rockefeller, crowned Emperor of all the temperate toppers and sober sots, and moral morphiamaniacs in the world!"

He clawed out a ghastly hand as though to reach for the sceptre of his hellish kingdom, and fell back gurgling. The end had come to this man, so great and so infamous, who had forever benefited the human race in the endeavour to degrade it yet lower than its lowest.

"Pray for me, curse you!" the dying man moaned, shaking, and holding to the bed-rail.

Allan Armitage, aspirant to Holy Orders, stood over Brantin and looked in his dreadful eyes with hollow blue ones, burning with the flame that Faith kindles in the souls of men.

"Give me your secret to use for God," he said solemnly, "and I will pray, and it may be that He will listen to my prayer!"

The other jerked out a string of foul black curses.

"So you've showed your hand, Sucker—have you? You'd bunco me, would you? You'd hold me up and rob me, on the very brink of Hell? But no! I've strength enough . . . you'll see!"

The claw-like fingers tore in frenzy at the pocket-book, and failed to open it; and Brantin howled like a beast and lifted it to his mouth, and tried to worry at the strap-buckle with his teeth.

"Man, man!" cried Armitage, quivering and panting in his own deadly weakness. "I am not going to rob you! . . . Tell me to burn that paper you have there when you are dead, and I will faithfully carry out your will. But think, think!—this may be your sole chance—not of atonement, for how could such an act atone for a life that has been, from early manhood to middle age, an insult flaunted in the Face of your Maker? But of restitution. Whether you go to Hell or whether you do not, return this one gift of God's to Him before He summons you. Give me that discovery of yours to use in His name for the good of miser-

able, debauched, degraded humanity, and I swear to you, upon the Cross of my Redeemer, that the profits—if there are any—shall be scrupulously paid over to your children! Are their names and addresses in that book?"

Sight was going. The eyes of the dying man were like faded negatives of eyes. A harsh rattle came by way of assent.

"Then give me the Formula," said Allan Armitage, "and may God so deal with me and mine as I deal with you and yours!"

The groping hand and the sightless eyes sought for the legacy in vain. Armitage guided the cold wet hand.

"Take it," said the rattling, choking voice, "and remember. . . . It's damnation for you . . . if you don't keep . . . word! Now pray!"

Allan Armitage fell upon his thin knees by the bedside and lifted up his feeble voice in intercession for the spotted soul.

Quivering in every wasted limb and bathed in the sweat of his own deadly weakness, he ended for lack of breath. Brantin's eyes were already fixed and sightless, but a laugh of ghastly mockery was on his swollen blue lips, and speech came from them, struggling and disjointed, but yet to be understood.

"No . . . use, Sucker! I've played my last . . . hand against . . . Almighty God . . . and He has . . . euchred me just as I was crying game! . . .

For I wrote the Formula out in Mark . . . to hold it safer . . . and . . . unless they teach thieves' shorthand at your English Universities . . . I reckon it's as good as burned. Quick! Prop me up . . . give me a pencil . . . paper! . . . I'll show . . . Damn this dying! Men like me ought to live at least as long as . . . gray parrots . . . or elephant bulls."

The pencil trailed feebly over the paper, the blind eyes strove in vain to see. Something seemed to strike the hand aside, and the body fell over, there was a spasm, and so began the final struggle. Life went out like a wasted candle-flame as grey dawn came peeping through the slatted shutters of Kellerbusch's Farm, and Allan Armitage, sick and shuddering, rose up from beside the degraded corpse of the miserable wretch to whom the civilised world of to-day owns itself in debt.

II.

Allan Armitage lived to leave Kellerbusch's. When he went he carried with him the black strapped pocket-book that was so important a property in the grim tragedy that played itself out when the New York doctor died.

Pasted, for security, upon the marbled inner cover of the pocket-book, which had been stripped of all the perforated blank leaves it once contained, was

a quarter-sheet of cheap coarse note covered with rude figures and uncouth signs, heavily scored into the soft paper with a thick indelible pencil. A couple of yellowed letters in an inner pocket, addressed to a name that presumably had belonged to the deceased owner of the pocket-book, threw no light upon the rough puzzle over which Armitage racked his brain until he became oblivious of the sufferings of his body.

Perhaps the late graduate of Holybourne had never really suffered from tuberculosis. At any rate the symptoms of that fell disease were checked in Armitage. He ceased to sweat and be feverish o' nights, his hacking cough was eased, his staring bones were clothed with wholesome flesh. You are to see the man newly made over, in the endeavour to find the key to a cipher that Transatlantic and Colonial sports and criminals and convicts employ, and know by the name of Mark.

What of Mark?

It is a primitive and grotesque, and absurdly simple form of secret writing, and yet, like all inventions of the illiterate, it admirably serves its end. It consists in reducing the ordinary alphabet of twenty-six letters and a symbol to nine common marks. By differentiating the marks each pair or group or gang of users may have a separate, and peculiar, cipher. But usually the nine common signs are as follows :

I O † Λ V □ - □ <

Each sign, used singly, duplicated and triplicated, conveys three letters of the alphabet. Thus :

A	B	C	D	E	F
I	II	III	O	OO	OOO
G	H	I	J	K	L
†	††	†††	Λ	ΛΛ	ΛΛΛ

and so on. . . .

Nothing can be baser, more uncouth or more degraded, than this cipher. It bears the same relation to ordinary caligraphy that the mouthings of the dumb bear to the speech of the trained orator. But it admirably serves the turn of those who use it.

It kept the dead sinner's secret closer than he sought, and yet the Formula hidden in the vulgar repetitions of rude symbols, wrought a miracle of healing, and sent the Reverend Allan Armitage back to the old country, a thinnish but fairly sound young Briton. He did not again take up his hoe and toil in the Vineyard of the Missionary. He settled down at a big leather-covered desk in the Reading Room of the British Museum Library, and breathing the old familiar atmosphere, flavoured with Russia-leather bindings, hot-pressed rag paper, paste and second-hand clothes, knew content at last in the study of exhaustive treatises on Secret Writing, Ancient and Modern.

But the treatises of the cryptographic experts and the scholia of their critics did not aid Armitage.

The afforded examples of ciphers employed by thieves, and tramps, and vagrants threw a false misleading glimmer upon the tangled path. There came a time when he knew despair, and nearly burned the black-strapped pocket-book in the smoky fireplace of his shabby bed-sitting-room in Great Titchfield Street, W.C. But he did not burn it, because the restless spirit of the New York doctor plucked at his shabby pepper-and-salt tweed sleeve, or because his good Angel was on duty. He thrust the pocket-book back into the inner breast-pocket of his shabby Norfolk jacket, and threw on the felt-basin hat dear to the theological student's soul, and blundered down the steep linoleum-covered stairs and plunged into the great spinning whirlpool of gray mysterious London.

It was the October of 1902—the fall of the year that saw the end of the South African War. A pleasant scent of autumn leaves, coming from the gardens of the old-fashioned squares and the more distant parks, was drowned in fumes of petrol as the smelly motor-cars of that remote era buffed and hooted by. Armitage got mechanically into a four-wheeler, and was carried to the door of his last hope, a man who had given the best years of his life to the study of secret writing.

He found his man to be ominously disengaged, and was admitted to his study. The tracing of Brantin's Formula lay upon the blotting-pad, and the fine contemptuous smile that curved the thin

lips of the cryptographist struck death to Armitage's last hope, even before the words came :

"These signs do not suggest any kind of cryptograph with which I happen to be acquainted. For one thing, they are not arranged with any method or regularity, but haphazard, and no interpretation that I can bring to bear upon them will bear out the supposition of their being a prescription either in Latin, Greek, Hebrew or Arabic, or any other language, living or dead, with which I happen to be acquainted. Scan these signs from right to left, from left to right, sideways or reversed; they will only convey one meaning, and that is Nothing. The paper might contain a private cipher, of course, but without the key"—the scholar shrugged his lean shoulders—"it might just as well be what I think it, the meaningless scribble of a lunatic."

Armitage's jaw dropped. He mechanically took the yellow-paper tracing from the thin cold fingers that tendered it back to him. The "meaningless scribble of a lunatic" had meant such volumes to him. He had seemed to himself to be the bearer of a sealed vial containing a priceless gift of God to suffering, sinning Humanity. Only a little thing prevented the breaking of the seal, and the outflowing of the miraculous tide of healing upon the stricken, perishing world. Only such a little thing. . . . The learned pandit, even in his secret anxiety to get rid of this crank-brained young

intruder and devote himself to the Punic inscription that offered a crackable nut to his learned facility, knew a faint thrill of pity as he read the blank despair in Armitage's face.

"You are very much depressed by my unfavourable opinion. You really believe that there was—something—in this?"

He tapped the tracing with a leaden-hued fingernail, and Armitage said huskily, with the bitter salt of tears stinging his eyes :

"I believed there was something in it!"

Red blood sprang into his white cheeks, the fire of enthusiasm blazed in his eyes, his thin sweet voice gained something of its lost power. "The blight of modern civilisation, the madness of the age, the misery of millions upon millions, the degeneration and damnation of millions upon millions more. . . . I believed the cure for them would be found in that writing, the legacy of a sinner left to me in trust for Heaven. By its aid I hoped to strike a blow at the root of Intemperance throughout this world, that God made so beautiful, and men have made so hideous. And the sot and the toper and the debauched were to have risen up and blessed me,—cured of their fatal craving, freed from the dominion of drugs and the curse of Drink—for ever!"

"Ah!" said the scholar, with a narrowing of his pale eyes. "Quite an Utopian vision—quite so. And I have dissipated the illusion. I regret it of course, but——"

“Regret nothing, sir,” said Armitage almost roughly, “for I believe still !”

He took leave, and went out from among the scholar’s Oriental manuscripts and written stones, upon the even more eloquent pavements of London. As he walked he held the black strapped pocket-book close against his heart. We love so passionately that for which we have suffered.

It was five o’clock upon a Wednesday afternoon, and crowds of well-dressed women, sparsely sprinkled with men, were pouring out of the West End theatres. Armitage was involved by an eddy of the throng pouring through the doors of a fashionable Regent Street teashop, and swept in with them. Smart, fashionable Society women, and pretty, well-bred looking young girls, were all screaming together as they pecked at the dishes of bonbons and Viennese pastry like a flock of paroquets revelling in the branches of a tree of ripe fruit.

The waitresses were all busy. Armitage, conscious of hunger and thirst, moved between the crowded tables to give an order at the counter, where ladies, young and old, were standing four deep. A young girl, fair and grey-eyed, with an exquisite wealth of pale yellow hair woven in a massive plait, and tied with a black ribbon, smiled slyly at another girl of the same age, under the curved brim and drooping plume of her hat, as she stretched her hand to take a teacup from the woman behind the counter.

The cup was half full of a bright amber liquid. A familiar peaty odour greeted Armitage's nostrils. It was raw whisky these Society women and girls were drinking, not tea. At meals they would use mineral water, possibly tinged with claret. But at other times. . . .

A distinguished West End physician, specialist in obscure nervous derangements, and well-known to Armitage, had many patients among this class. One would deem herself to be suffering from neuritis, another would lay claim to some undiagnosed disease of the digestive organs. And if the man of medicine bluntly told them the real nature of their complaint they would deny it; and so, with anger in their eyes, and falsehoods on their lips, or sarcasms aimed at the proneness of the medical Faculty to travel in a beaten groove, depart, to seek another man who avoided the telling of unpleasant truths.

"So, I don't tell them the truth at all," the narrator had ended. "Why should I send them to the other man? I sympathise, and say they have got whatever they fancy most, and throw in bromide and nux-vomica in sherry. The other man could do no more. Why should I send them to him?"

Armitage had despised the physician only less than his patients at the time. Now his heart held out hands of pity to these his sisters young and old, bearing upon their shoulders the burden that his hand might never unloose. The blue-eyed

seventeen-year-old with the apple-blossom face, smiling at her girl friend over her half-tea-cup of undiluted whisky, how long would it be before she came knocking at the bland physician's door? The memory of her face went with Armitage through the streets of the West End that were lighted brilliantly now, and crowded with men and women in search of pleasure, and women and men who were in search of other things. Bread and money, revenge or knowledge, but Death at the end of all.

Night came as Armitage still tramped the West End streets. The public and private drinking-bars were packed, the cells of the police-stations were gorged to repletion with the grosser drunkenness that is seen of men, and knows no art of masking the vice that has stamped its image on its votaries. The clubs, small and great, aristocratic or plebeian, and the restaurants and the wine and spirit purveyors, and the grocers who held licences for the retail of liquor, did colossal business beyond all record. Ah! and in every chemist's window, gorgeous with glass cases displaying a multi-coloured array of little boxes and little bottles, you might read, if you had eyes to see, great riches gathered in, and daily augmenting, in the supply, to the rabid appetite so hideously possessing men and women, of the sure and certain means of physical, mental, and spiritual ruin and death.

II.

Some great chemical product companies that kept these pharmacies supplied, catered indefatigably for every rank and every class. The servant-girl and the shop-assistant, the overworked clerk and the valet who had been kept up all night waiting for his master, could buy for a penny or so neat little powders of veronal, or some other dangerous hypnotic, warranted to charm away headache and depression, and pick-me-ups of the latest American brand.

You could be supplied gratis with gilt leather-bound alphabetical lists of ailments, supplemented by their advertised remedies in the form of tablets or jujubes or lozenges, containing powerful medications, and essential oils, made palatable with sugar and sweet gums. For richer people, who could afford to pay more, there were all the resources of hypodermic medication. With a whole gamut of drugs at hand, fiendish fantasias could be played upon the human brain and nervous system, involving collapse and wreck of the whole fabric in the shortest space of time.

You could obtain the most complete, compact, and convenient little equipments for the ruin of body and mind, in elegant little cases of fancy leather, nickel-plated metal or aluminium, gun-metal or chased silver or gold, small enough to be hung upon the châtelaine or carried in the waist-

coat pocket. These containing from five to fifteen tubes of highly concentrated poisons, a set of hollow gold needles, a flask of distilled water for making solutions, and a syringe of the newest patented design.

For people who minded expense not at all, or who found it necessary to conceal an acquired and deadly habit from anxious, watchful eyes, the companies offered a marvel of delicate devilish workmanship in the shape of a tiny gold and jewelled medicine-chest, fitted with miniature bottles containing possibly a hundred doses of intoxicants, soporifics, hypnotics, or stimulants in the most highly-concentrated form. You wore this upon a chain as a locket, or on a bangle as a *porte-bonheur*, or as a charm upon a watch-guard. There was a golden, jewel-set syringe to match, that fitted into a ring.

Wonderful was the variety of drugs offered to a world desirous of poisoning itself. Not only chloroform, Indian hemp, morphia and cocaine, but aconitine, hyoscine, atropine, and the strychnine sulphates. With many others.

And if you were nervous about administering them hypodermically to yourself, some chemists kept skilled assistants who would load you up and save you the trouble—for a fee.

* * * * *

The hours were shrinking small. The restaurants and public houses closed one by one. Only the

chemists' shops and drug-stores remained open. A stream of turbid life rolled down the pavements of Piccadilly, and swarmed over the asphalt that was then enclosed in places by the rough hoardings of the Tube works. In the electric light the faces of the buyers as of the sellers of flesh were clay-blue. The central patch of rouge upon painted cheeks showed as purplish-brown. And the great glass bottles in the windows of the chemists' shops and drug-stores threw prismatic rays upon those passing faces, and stretched out multi-coloured tentacles towards them as if to seize and drag them in.

Armitage, heated and weary now, entered a chemist's shop where there was an iced-soda fountain, and ordered and emptied a glassful of the cool, fizzing drink. As he handed back the empty tumbler, a well-appointed horse-drawn brougham stopped outside the shop. Three ladies occupied the carriage, two young, one elderly and white-haired. All were in theatre-wraps, their heads draped with lace scarfs.

A young lady got out, spoke to the box-coated, cockaded servant who helped her to alight, and came rustling into the shop. She was pale and slender and black-haired and very pretty. Diamond stars scintillated through her draping laces, the neck of her furred wrap, a little open, showed a superb pendant of diamonds and rubies glowing and blazing on her thin white bosom, her attenuated white hand, holding her plumed fan and the

opera-glass in its embroidered silk case, was laden with costly jewelled rings.

She looked haggard and her dark eyes had weary shadows round them. They rested on the flaunting women at the shop-end, and withdrew in evident disgust. She paid no heed to Armitage, but spoke in low quick tones to the chemist, a grey-whiskered fatherly individual who listened respectfully, bending his sleek bald head. Evidently the lady was a well-known customer of the establishment.

"Please be quick! . . . I have only a moment. . . ."

"Certainly, madam. Have you the—ahem?"

"Yes, yes! How stupid of me!"

She drew a little jewelled amulet-case from its hiding-place within her dress, and unfastened it from its fine gold chain. Her hand shook, and she glanced over her shoulder to make sure that the mother and sister who were waiting in the brougham showed no intention of following her into the shop. The chemist turned aside to fill the little case with miniature bottles containing tiny white tablets. He was quick, but hardly quick enough for her.

"Thank you, oh! thank you!" Her eyes were fastened on the chemist's deft fingers packing the tiny bottles in their places with accustomed skill.

"You have nearly finished?"

"Very nearly, madam." As he gave her the little case, he leaned forward across the counter to

ask in a solicitous undertone : " And the Captain ? May I ask, is there any news ? "

A spasm wrung her pretty, miserable face. She shook her head sadly.

" No, no news ! We—we thought—we hoped—he might be found at Wanderton with other English officers who were prisoners there. We—we were disappointed, there was no trace—— " Her voice rose in a breathless cry : " Oh, for God's sake, don't ask me any more ! "

She fled out of the shop, passing a tall, middle-aged man who lifted his hat with courtesy as the shrinking figure rustled by in its laces and silks. He had only accorded the politeness to a stranger, he did not know her at all. The heavy overcoat that covered his evening clothes, a costly garment lined with Persian lamb, was unbuttoned ; a white silk muffler protected his throat, and guarded his immaculate shirt-front from soil. He had upon him the stamp of the prosperous physician, and the lines upon his ravaged, still handsome face bespoke him a *viveur*. His harsh and laboured breathing and the bluish hue of his skin, told Armitage something else.

The newcomer, who walked feebly and wearily, nodded to the chemist, whose face seemed suddenly to have been painted white, as he turned to a locked cupboard-compartment in the rows of gilt lettered drawers behind him, and took out a blue glass vial. His hand shook a little as he set the vial on the

counter, with a decanter of distilled water and a graduated glass. But the habit of his profession prevailed, and he was as bland as ever.

He asked a question in a low tone. The customer answered, and watched with a curious intensity as the chemist unstoppered the vial, liberating a strong odour of bitter almonds, and dropped, with infinite precision and care, fifteen drops into the glass. To this he added a proportion of distilled water, handed the mixture to his client,—and waited, breathlessly, and with that white, scared look, to see him drink it down.

The customer tossed off the draught. Then, within the instant, a change was wrought in him. His haggard face took life and colour, his eyes brightened, he drew a long deep breath, squared his shoulders, smiled pleasantly at the nervous chemist, threw down two half-crowns on the counter, and walked out of the shop, a new man, to embark upon the pleasures of the night that now began for him. The chemist swept the cash into the till, and as he wiped the perspiration from his bald forehead, he glanced sharply at Armitage.

But Armitage's face said nothing, and the chemist mopped his own once more and turned with a will to the business of the evening. His partner, or a principal assistant, seemed to sit at the receipt of special custom in a parlour that was behind the shop, and had a door with ground-glass panels in the upper half of it.

A few of the customers who crossed the parlour-threshold were men, but ninety per cent. were women of François Villon's liberal sisterhood. And whereas they went in dim-eyed and drawn, and haggard under their rouge, with the weariness of vice, they came out as though newly stamped in the Mint of Pleasure, stooping on the threshold of the morphia-den to fasten their silken garters, or pulling up their long gloves over the marks of the *pique*, hailing their female friends and their male acquaintances with gay, empty peals of laughter and rattling volleys of chaff and slang. Armitage's heart bled for them as they ordered fresh pick-me-ups and sucked down their poisons, and shouted and screamed and frolicked and cursed. "Ah, poor brothers! Ah, poor sisters!" he thought, "in whose veins, in common with how many others, burns and rankles the accursed craving. No hope for you, no help for you, any more than for the rest!"

He pushed through the crowd of seekers after forgetfulness, gained the streets, and turned in the direction of the Strand. He wearied again after a while and went into a gilt and tile-lined saloon, ordered a lemon-squash and sat at a little marble-topped table with his back against a delicately-wrought frieze of sporting loves and exquisite nude nymphs, watching the American bar-tender, a moustached person clad in immaculate white drills, with blazing diamond studs and cuff-links, mix drinks of

marvellous components and nomenclature, with no less marvellous dexterity; turning when not actively engaged in tossing mixtures of liquors from one tall glass to another, to make rough entries of owed-for drinks on a white transparent slate hanging from a brass hook against the pictured wall behind him.

One moment Armitage sat, listlessly watching the coarse jewelled hand that moved the chewed pencil-butt clumsily over the opaque white surface, and at the next, with a sudden strange leap and thrill of recognition, and a stranger sense of awe, he rose from his seat, moved to the long glittering counter, and said :

"Excuse what may appear to you an inquisitive question—but—those marks convey some private meaning?"

"Guess so!" admitted the bar-tender, nettled by the brusque tone of authority, and the direct gaze of Armitage's clear grey eyes.

"It is a cipher that is not generally known?" continued Armitage.

"I—guess—not!" drawled the bar-tender, contributing generously to his private spittoon. Armitage put another question.

"The cipher is more particularly employed by a certain class of men? Most particularly your own class?"

"I—reckon," said the bar-tender, deliberately prolonging his inflections, as though he were

trickling molasses from a ladle, "as—yew—might—find—about a—score—of individooals—in—this—yer city—as—are—capperble—of—conveyin'—their—private—idees—in—Mark—if—yew—was lucky."

"Thank you. The cipher is known as 'Mark,'" said Armitage, mentally registering it. He drew out a note-case, took from it a ten pound note of the Bank of England, and laid it on the nickel counter. "This is at your disposal if you will teach it to me!"

"Guess I got no time," said the bar-tender, dropping his drawl and giving a sulky wag of his blue-shaven chin, "to waste actin' as school marm to Britishers." He went on with his occupation of mixing and serving drinks, which had never been intermitted.

"I will only ask you to supply me with the equivalent to the English alphabet, written down in Mark," said Armitage, masking his desperate eagerness as best he could. "And I will double the pay."

He drew out another ten pound note, and laid it beside the first, the sum representing one-third of the available funds at the investor's disposal. But the bar-tender, scenting a detective behind the close-shaven, intellectual mask and under the worn black semi-clerical attire, shrugged and went to the other end of the counter. And he spoke to a subordinate there, and jerked his thumb

meaningly towards Armitage, and Armitage moved out of the American bar reluctantly, as a man who has seen his soul's desire within his grasp and has had it snatched from him.

His faith in the leading of a Divine Hand was rudely shaken. Why had he been shown the end of all his selfless agony of seeking, only to be thrust forth on the long trail again? When had he sought his own profit, or anything but the welfare of his miserable fellow creatures? The question was fast sapping the foundations of reason, when Armitage, by a supreme effort, saved himself in time.

Inquiries later made through a private detective agency after the American bar-tender, proved that expert to have quitted his situation in the Strand and returned to his native New York. Armitage made no effort to trace him. He even left off seeking for the key of the cipher that had been within his reach that night, when the linen-clad expert with the jewelled paws, and the lacquered moustaches, had been proof against his offered bribe of twenty pounds. And he saved himself from becoming a crank by turning chemist.

Armitage had gone through the usual course of science at the university. You are to see him now immersed to the thinning hair upon his high temples in therapeutic chemistry, mingling chlorides usually employed in the treatment of alcoholism and kindred nervous derangements,

with others yet unproved, and experimenting, in default of an intemperate subject, upon sober Armitage.

Sober Armitage proving useless to the ardent seeker after enlightenment, his proprietor took measures to render him a fitter subject.

Friends, visiting Armitage's rooms, were scandalised at the alteration in his appearance that gave evidence of the degrading habit to which a once upright and temperate young man had unhappily become addicted. The principal of the College heard and wrote to expostulate with his late pupil. Armitage, who was then engaged in testing the effects upon Armitage of morphia and cocaine, had lost the habit of opening letters, with a good many other habits that were even better worth keeping. Unwashed, unkempt, a moral ruin and a physical wreck, he had drifted beyond the saving clutch of his own great altruistic obsession. He had lost himself in trying to save others. And—as a spectator might placidly sit and watch the struggles of a drowning man reproduced per medium of the cinematograph—Armitage saw Armitage going down, down! into the grey, primeval sludge, where human wrecks and failures drift, suspended forever; and when his long-unpaid landlord served a writ upon him, and his few remaining possessions were seized for rent, he rose up out of the tattered armchair where he spent his days and nights, when he was not wandering in

those strange scenes, and wonderful or awful places that only the drunkard and the druggard know.

The bailiff and the landlord had gone through his pockets before they let the broken creature free. There was nothing upon him but his dog's-eared Bible, in its shabby silken case, and a black strapped pocket book, empty save for two old letters and a bit of scrawled paper pasted on the inside cover. And they left him those two things, and the hypodermic syringe and the morphia tablets that he cried and blubbered to be allowed to keep—both being charitable men, as men go.

"Now, hook it!" said the bailiff, who was old, and still employed the Middle Victorian slang of 1859.

"Get!" added the more modern landlord, contributing the impetus of a shove, and the degraded wreck of Armitage shambled down the shabby staircase of the Bloomsbury lodgings, and vanished in the great grey whirlpool of London Town.

Betrayed by a false conviction and a false hope; ruined because he had given all he had in the hope of saving others; shipwrecked on his great project—the regeneration of alcohol and drug-poisoned men and women by the adulteration of their deteriorated blood with an antitoxin;—lost because he had so yearned to save, you see Armitage at the juncture when he had forgotten even this, ministered to by a poor fallen woman.

The ground here calls for delicate going, Allan Armitage occupying with justice, at this moment of

writing, a high place in the public esteem, and possessing a character beyond reproach. His wife, too—no man, labouring unselfishly in the vast Augean stable of this world, solely possessed by the desire of leaving it but a shade or two cleaner than he found it, ever had a nobler, more devoted helper. But virtuous, pious daughters of Mrs. Grundy, dimly cognisant of strange stories in connection with Mrs. Armitage's early history, with difficulty restrain the impulse to pull aside their skirts when they pass her, and are not to be coerced by husbands into leaving cards. I might add, that as Mrs. Alan Armitage has never pretended to their acquaintance, its denial does not grieve her. She is a pale sweet-faced woman with candid eyes, and an inexhaustible gift of sympathy with the depraved, the miserable, and the wicked of her fellow-creatures. This healing balm, she, even in her degraded days, possessed the art of giving to those who needed it. And none was more in need than the broken-down drunkard and druggard whose garment of shamefulness was cut of the cloth that deacons are wont to wear. Magdalene gave him shelter in the one poor room of her lodging, and sinned, poor soul ! to keep its roof above him, and to find him the wherewithal to pay for his daily debauch. One cannot blink the truth. And towards the small hours of one morning, while he lay almost pulseless, scarcely breathing, in the trance-like sleep that is so dearly bought by the

votaries of morphia, and she, sitting beside him, darned and patched his seedy clothes, the black strapped pocket-book fell out of the torn pocket of the dirty old pepper-and-salt Norfolk jacket, and she picked it up, and opened it, and the wheel of Fate gave one more turn for Armitage.

For the woman, glancing at the half sheet of smudgy note-paper heavily scrawled with those rude, illiterate characters, started and winced. In cruel early days, of which she never spoke or thought without a shudder, she had been forced by an evil man, for some strange secret reason, known only to himself, to learn to write and read Mark. Remembering those old lessons, burned in by blows and ill-usage, she read now. And the man on the bed, waking, saw her sitting beside him, a good angel in soiled garments, with scorched and broken wings, and heard her spelling out, letter by letter, the fateful secret that he had given health and honour, hope and the esteem of men; his own self-respect and the favour of God, to solve, and given vainly.

It trickled by slow degrees from the dulled ear to the drugged brain, the Formula of Brantin. And its effect was miraculous. A touch upon the woman's arm brought her head round, and Armitage was sitting up upon the bed, looking at her with eyes that were sane, and at the same time the eyes of a stranger.

"Read that again!" he said, and pointed to the

black pocket-book that had slipped from the startled woman's fingers into her lap. "Afterwards you shall tell me who you are and how I came here. But first, read that again!"

The woman obeyed, trembling. Armitage listened, and a curtain rolled up in his brain, and he remembered Kellerbusch's Farm, and knew that he had at last lighted upon the discovery of the New York doctor. Ay, this was it! There were two chlorides of two metals, and you mingled them in a certain proportion, and administered them by hypodermic injection, or by means of an electric battery and pads of cotton-wool, well soaked. It began to take effect by the third injection: by the seventh day the patient was practically cured, in three weeks time the saturation was complete. As a result the nervous centres, once thoroughly impregnated with the Formula, would be so fortified against the attacks of alcohol and even certain alkaloid poisons, that these agents would prove impotent when introduced into the system. The period of immunity would probably extend over six years.

Armitage rose up from the disordered bed, and saw a ghastly face he did not know for his own in the cracked and broken looking-glass. But as the days went by, and the wretched single room became a laboratory, the marred and altered face began to show faint transitory resemblances to what it once had been.

For, as of old, Armitage experimented upon Armitage. Administering the counter-agent in subcutaneous injections, and with the assistance of his companion, employing it *per* medium of the electric battery and the wetted pad. His Samaritaness's poor savings went to buy the battery, a bad little second-hand affair enough, but it served. For a day came when Armitage felt the fetters of his vice loosen, and later he heard them clank, falling from his galled limbs to the bare floor.

The physical change in him, wrought by the saturation, showed little outwardly. The outlines of his features were sharper and harder, he was conscious of an added clearness and lucidity of mind. He no longer desired whisky to the point of anguish, his heroic thirst for the fire-water was gone. He drank, and it had no more effect upon him now than pure water, his armour-plated nerve-centres were now proof against the toxin of alcohol as they were impervious to the attacks of the alkaloids. Morphia had no result. Cocaine failed when he tested the effect of the narcotic and the stimulant. He was immune, thenceforth, for the allotted term of years. When he knew this he rose up and girded his loins, and came up out of the depths of Hell, leading his good angel by the hand.

It wore his ring, the hand that had done so much for him. Say, if you will, that Armitage degraded Armitage by such a union. I hold that he honoured not only her, but himself.

Ten years ago, this was. To-day, entering the wide vestibule of the Brantin Institute, with its statues and palms and Oriental carpets, and polite, uniformed attendants, it seems to the ignorant stranger that he has strayed into a hotel. To all intents and purposes it is a hotel—for the reception of a certain kind of guest.

You may see the guests, men and women, coming and going. The bloated, puffy, degraded face and form, and the burned-out eye of the alcoholic, are common to the majority. The contracted pupil, the uncertain gait, the dreamy self-absorption or the highly-strung nervous excitement; the degraded personal habits distinctive of the slaves of morphia, the blazing eyes, the jerky movements, the sudden muscular spasms peculiar to the puppet of cocaine: he sees all these symptoms multiplied in a hundred victims, with others even more grotesque, even more ugly and terrible.

The place is handsomely appointed. From floor to floor go noiseless elevators. There are reception-rooms for women, and smoking-rooms for men; there are drawing-rooms, reading and writing-rooms, and there are two glass-roofed rooms built out at the back, where patients of either sex attend at stated times, alone, or in care of male or female nurses, for the hypodermic and electrical treatment that can be had nowhere else.

Everywhere the foot falls noiselessly on three-inch rubber, under thick carpet. Following the

clear-eyed, grey-haired gentleman, unobtrusively attired, who has volunteered to be your guide, you meet, in the long corridors, nurses wheeling invalid chairs. Sometimes several of them push a rubber-tyred stretcher-bed, on which, fastened down by bands of webbing, and covered with a light cloth from the curious or frightened eye, is something that whimpers or makes beast-like noises, or hideously sings and laughs.

It is not a madman, or a madwoman, the strapped-down creature. It is somebody who has, like every guest of this strange hostelry, been bitten by the mania for alcohol or drugs.

None of the windows of the large, airy, well-ventilated rooms open upon anything but a grating. The chairs are of bentwood, without sharp angles, the corners of the rooms are rounded off like the corners of the furniture. There is no breakable crockery or glass. The walls are soundproof and covered with indiarubber, under the pretty paper, like the floors beneath the soft carpeting. In one room that the visitor passes, a high-bred, elegant, graciously-mannered lady is entertaining a circle of society friends with brilliant conversation. That is, she would be, if the friends were there.

In another room a young girl is foaming and writhing in terrible convulsions, in another . . .

The guest pales and winces as he passes that door, outside which two alert, vigorous, grey-gowned, white-capped nurses are waiting, in case

the attendant within should call. His guide takes him along the corridor and through into the men's side of the Institute. A haggard young man, fashionably dressed, followed by a liveried servant carrying a hat-box and suit-case, comes up to the guide and shakes him warmly by the hand.

"I am cured, Mr. Armitage. I leave here this morning. Let me thank you for your considerate kindness, for the help you gave. As long as I live I shall remember this place with gratitude. I go down to my people in the North to-morrow, they are hardly able to believe that I——"

He hesitates, but Armitage knows the end of the unfinished sentence. He thanks the grey-haired man again, and wrings his hand, and goes on his way cured and hopeful. And Armitage beckons the visitor to follow, and passes on.

On the other side of the door he now goes by a mother-naked man is sitting on the floor, driving an imaginary automobile. In the recent case of the young embryo Member of Parliament, it has been a splendid coach. Only he has been the vehicle, with a four-in-hand of rampant devils in the traces, and the enemy of mankind enthroned on the box-seat as driver of the team.

And the devil-driven one has gone away cured, and the others will follow. Is not the Formula of the New York doctor a specific for the blight of modern civilisation, a cure for the disease of the Age?

And yet . . . It seems to the visitor that he

hears somebody laughing behind him. He turns and looks down the long bright pleasant corridor. No one is there.

He follows his courteous guide through the wide airy corridors, and at his invitation enters into Armitage's private office. The mocking thing that dogged his footsteps seems to have been left behind. But when the bell of the telephone rings, he hears it titter as the grey-haired man at the writing-table takes the receiver in hand.

"Is Mr. Armitage there? I wish to speak to him!"

It is a voice that has terror and despair in it. Yet it belongs to a patient who went away cured, happy and hopeful, a little while ago. Armitage answers:

"I, Armitage, am here. What can I do for you?"

The frightened voice says, shaking until the thin wire vibrates:

"I cannot drink or use drugs any more, Mr. Armitage. The desire has gone from me—the stuff has no more effect on me at all!"

"You are henceforth immune," Armitage says. "For a certain space of years to come, you are inoculated to resist those influences that were ruining you. It is a great thing to know that!"

The scared voice says, shaking with terror:

"A great thing, as you say. . . . A very great thing, sir! But . . . what shall I do when I want to forget?"

Armitage holds the receiver, and the lines that

grief and care have ploughed upon his face show deeply. He does not immediately reply.

"Must I look in the face of my sorrow and my sin for years, long years?" the quavering voice asks. "Shall I never be able to hide from myself?"

"Never," is the answer, "by the aid of alcohol or drugs."

The desperate voice breaks out in despairing curses and breaks off to cry: "Is there no help? Is there no hope?"

"There is help," Armitage answers, "and hope also."

"Oh, where?" quavers the voice in anguish.

"In Christ," is the answer. "Through the Blood that He shed for sinners on the Cross of Calvary."

"I have never thought of Him," wails the voice. "I do not know where He is to be found! How shall I reach Him?"

"Ask my wife," says Armitage, and his lined forehead smoothes. He hangs up the receiver with a smile upon his careworn face. For though the Evangelist has ceased to preach, the Magdalene has found her mission. Mrs. Armitage, the woman whom virtuous women will not condescend to call upon, has her compensations and her uses, and when the work of the therapist is complete, begins the noble work of the woman who has washed the Sacred Feet with tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head.

DOROTÉA ET CIE.

I.

THE three prettiest women in Paris sat together in a boudoir that was exquisitely tinted, and warmly fragrant, and marvellously furnished, and divinely draped and adorned (not crowded) with wonderful works of art, and even then was only a perfect setting for the loveliness of the Three Graces it enshrined.

The Hotel Vaubonsoir was one of the most charming houses in Paris, standing as it did within leafy private gardens, full of roses and plashing fountains, near the entrance of the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne. All the greatest French artists had been summoned to aid in making it exquisite within, but its mistress and owner was the loveliest thing to be found within its marble-faced walls. And she was Dorotéa-Maria, the young and widowed Duchess of Bellaselva. Her companions were the Princess Delidoff, an *élégante* of great beauty, allied by blood to two reigning European monarchs. A royalty of another kind belonged to the third lady, a lively, brilliant, and yet subtle creature, who reigned over the hearts of her Paris

public from the boards of their favourite Comedy Theatre.

It was Jenny Trudaine, who said with a shrug, sipping the orange-flavoured caravan-tea from a cup that was a mere bubble of coloured porcelain :

“Ah, bah ! everybody wants money ! And up to now we women have got it in every imaginable way except by mining for it. Let us three unite to be the exception that makes the rule !”

She gaily tossed a bonbon to a magnificent tawny Persian cat, who sniffed at the, to him, uneatable delicacy with disgust, and proudly stalked away to lap at the saucer of cream his mistress set for him upon the rose-velvet carpet. The great actress's peal of silver laughter followed him.

“Altair represents the public !” cried she. “The stupid public, that will put its money in gold mines, or in silver mines, in ruby mines, or in diamond mines that have no existence except on stamped paper, because it knows gold and silver by the touch and feel, and buys the precious stones to hang on its wives—and the wives of its dearest friends !—yet sniffs suspiciously at a mine of radium, because, though radium is in everybody's mouth, hardly anybody has ever seen any. Me, I call that idiotic ! Am I not one of the principal shareholders in this venture of ours, and have I ever seen any ? Not so much !” She measured off an infinitesimal space upon her little pink and polished thumb-nail, and stopped for breath.

"I have seen some once," said the Princess Delidoff, who was a slender, delicately fair woman, with onyx-black eyes and ropes of pale golden hair, and a physique of tempered steel under her fine lady's indolence and lassitude. "It was a speck of a few milligrammes of dirty, greyish-looking salt (a speck about as large as the head of a glass-topped toilet-pin) at the bottom of a tiny glass tube, hermetically sealed. The *savant* who lectured upon its properties caused the lights in the hall to be extinguished, and then the stuff glimmered like moonlight made solid. It was 'eerie,' as your old Scotch nurse used to say, my Dorotéa," she ended, turning to the Duchess, with whom she maintained a close friendship that had begun in early childhood, and had never been marred as yet by jealousy, or lack of sympathy, or any of the other causes that separate friends.

"It is more than eerie," said the Duchess Dorotéa, looking up from a mass of papers heaped upon an embossed gold tray. "It is divine, or diabolical, I am not sure which. . . . As said that great chemist—I am ungrateful enough to forget his name—who lost the sight of one eye as the result of an experiment that determined the healing virtues of this marvellous product, as applied in diseases of the visual organ, '*It is either the greatest gift, or the most frightful curse that science has ever bestowed upon the world.*' Perhaps that is why it interests one so profoundly!"

She bathed her lovely white hands in the piles of greenish-hued papers before her, which were, in fact, depreciated scrip representing in English money £150,000. The Princess spoke :

“Three years ago, when Gregorof, my husband, who then was Governor-General of Eastern Siberia, told me that in the deserted silver workings in the district of Ortai and Litchinsk, quantities of uranium pitchblende—the tarry-coloured alkaline ore from which radium chloride is extracted—were to be found, I began by telling Dorotéa—I always begin by telling Dorotéa—and getting her to suggest what I have in my mind!” She smiled at Dorotéa, and pulled the ears of a great white Borzoi that came up and laid a friendly paw on her velvet gown.

“Down, Aldebaran!” said Duchess Dorotéa, and Aldebaran obeyed with a sigh and a wistful look out of his great pale yellow eyes.

“Dorotéa thought,” continued the Princess, “that it would be fun to get a mining-concession from our Russian Government, float a Company, work the mines for uranium pitchblende, extract this priceless salt from it, sell it for millions upon millions, and become the two richest women in the world!”

“That was before I came in,” murmured Jenny Trudaine, nestling in among her cushions with a little yawn. “After, we were to be the three richest, and it did not come off. Provoking!”

“We formed ourselves into a Syndicate,” said the Princess, “and because we were idiots, or because we were women——”

“Gregorof would tell us it means the same thing,” said the Duchess of Bellaselva.

“Because we were idiots of women, we took Prince Oscar of Sidonia into the scheme and made him Grand Perpetual Chairman of the Syndicate, and his lawyer, Dr. Alexis Jurnetti, esteemed in his native capital of Vienna as quite a clever person——”

“A dangerously clever person!” put in the Duchess.

“A Life Director. Then they set things going, and heaps of prospectuses are printed, and sheets upon sheets of crackling green share-coupons, officially stamped, and called by all sorts of different names, are turned out, and heaps of our dearest friends buy them; and the Syndicate accumulate working capital to the extent of more than a million and a half of roubles—and then—and then——”

“Then, M. de Sidonia makes the extraordinary discovery, through his Russian agents,” said Mademoiselle Jenny, “that M. le Prince Gregorof Delidoff was mistaken, and that there is no uranium pitchblende in the abandoned silver-workings, or in East Siberia at all, for that matter! But why should the stupid public shriek at that, when it invests its money in other things that have no

existence, every hour of every day? In my opinion, you ought never to have acquainted them with the discovery of M. de Sidonia."

"How was it possible that, having induced our friends to speculate in what the Americans would doubtless term a 'wild cat' investment," said the Duchess Dorotéa, with a sigh, "Nadine and I should not buy back all their shares——"

"With the exception of my little lot," said Mademoiselle Jenny, "to which I cling in spite of your entreaties——"

"And as a result, dearest Nadine," said the Duchess Dorotéa, "behold yourself and me infinitely poorer and infinitely wiser than when we first took it into our two heads to *faire la planche* to other people in the money-making line."

"What I cannot make out," pouted Jenny Trudaine, nibbling with her pretty little white teeth at a *marron glacé*, "is, why you should have paid all that money out of your own pockets. Where are the million and a half of roubles that all this crackling stuff represents?" She pointed scornfully to the gold tray.

"M. de Sidonia——" hesitated the Princess.

"M. de Sidonia should know, certainly," added Duchess Dorotéa. "But he has never explained, and nothing has been heard of or from him for two years at least."

"And to put the definite question, as to what has

become of all the money," intimated the Princess gently, "would be to cast an aspersion upon the Prince's honour."

"Jenny!" cried the Duchess Dorotéa, indignantly, as the fair *comédienne* threw herself back among her cushions, emitting peal upon peal of tinkling laughter.

"Ah! ha, ha, ha!" screamed Jenny Trudaine. "The Prince's honour! Excuse me, Mesdames, I am a little hysterical!" She dried her tearful blue eyes with a minute cobweb of cambric. "Also, it has just dawned upon me that I have lost a great deal of cash."

"You would not consent to sell us back your shares, Mademoiselle," reminded the Duchess rather stiffly.

"Let me admit it. I was too clever!" sighed the *comédienne*. "Frankly, it occurred to me that you, Madame, and the Duchesse were what the horrid English, who adore me, call 'on the job.'"

"Oh!" exclaimed the Princess, in a shocked tone. She looked aghast at Duchess Dorotéa.

"You dared——" cried Dorotéa, rising to her splendid height.

"To think that you and Madame were simply 'bearing the market'—I think is the term—to produce a discouragement among those who had speculated in Siberian Radiums—and purchase back the entire issue of stock at a price below par. What can you expect? Remember, Mesdames, I

have never concealed from you that my mother was a *femme de chambre*!" Jenny made her famous gesture of depreciation, a little *moue* and shrug combined.

"Even though you cannot comprehend what is meant by *noblesse oblige*," said Dorotéa, whose fiery rage had quivered down to disdain, "you should at least give credit to those who have proved themselves your friends, for common honesty."

"Alas, Mesdames!" pleaded Jenny, and no one could tell whether a tear or a twinkle glittered in the bright eye that was not hidden by the cambric cobweb; "common honesty is a vulgar virtue for which M. le Prince de Sidonia is known to cultivate but little sympathy, and, knowing you to entertain a marked regard for the Prince—even to have allied yourselves with him in business—how was it possible to me not to suppose you were—excuse another English proverb, so *chic* is their very vulgarity!—'tarred with the same brush.' " She began to laugh again. "And if I erred, Mesdames, am I not richly punished, in losing all my money? Oh, and do not think I regret it!" the *comédienne* cried, with a flash of fierceness. "Never, never! since the loss of it has brought me to the knowledge of such noble hearts as yours!"

The ladies looked at Jenny and their indignant regard softened. One after another they rose, went to her and kissed her. And then a superb groom of the chambers entered apologetically

with a message. Quite a common person, who announced himself as a delegate from the united peasants of the villages of Ortai and Litchinsk, in a remote province of Eastern Siberia, entreated an audience of the Duchess of Bellaselva.

The ladies exchanged glances.

"We will see him!" said the Duchess Dorotéa. "Together," she added to the Princess and the *comédienne*, "for this is your affair as well as mine!"

"Markoff Platon," announced the groom of the chambers.

Markoff Platon, a gigantic young man, with a shaggy head of pale yellow hair and great hollow blue eyes, stood upon the threshold, dressed in peasant garb, and made three bows, peasant fashion, holding his old fur cap before him. Upright, his blond head very nearly reached the lintel of the doorway, and his great shoulders, in their sheepskin pelisse, filled up the space.

"That a peasant!" whispered the actress to herself, as she scanned the magnificent figure. "*Pas possible!*"

"I understand you wish to see me," said the Duchess of Bellaselva. "Certainly you arrive at a fortunate moment. For if, as I cannot but suppose is the case, you come upon business connected with the affairs of the two villages comprised within the bounds of the district conceded by the Russian Imperial Government for mining

purposes to the Profitable Pitchblende Syndicate, three of the four persons who constitute the Syndicate, and indeed represent the entire company of shareholders, happen to be present."

"Approach, pray, and begin!" said the Princess Delidoff impatiently.

"Yes, yes; what have you to tell us from our peasants?" cried Jenny Trudaine.

"This!" The man stretched out his hands. "But this, that for three years past they have suffered cruelly—that when I left them they were starving, dying like flies. The united Mirs of the villages of Ortai and Litchinsk send me to represent them, to plead for them in these words: 'The Emperor has placed us in your hands,' they say to you, 'to dig your mineral pitchblende from the bowels of the earth. But you give us but one day in the week to labour for ourselves, and what is that? Be merciful! Three days we will dig for you, as the Little Father says we must; the other three we will till the land, and tend our beasts and cut our wood. Concede us these, and we will live. Deny us, and we will bow our heads and die! We have spoken, by the lips of one of us!'"

"Ah, bah, you are not a peasant!" thought the actress. The Princess and the Duchess Dorotéa were lost in blank amazement. The Duchess was the first to recover herself.

"Monsieur," she began, "can this indeed be possible?"

"I am no Monsieur," said Markoff Platon, "but a tiller of the soil, and a digger of your pitchblende, like all the other peasants."

"*Dame!*" burst out Jenny Trudaine, "peasant or gentleman, how can you dig pitchblende when there is not to be had in those abandoned silvermines of Ortaï and Litchinsk enough to cover my finger-nail?"

"No pitchblende in Ortaï and Litchinsk!" exclaimed Markoff Platon, roughly. "Madame, you are deceived. There are thousands of tons beyond those already dug and sent away in *arbas* to the crushing-mills of the refining works your overseers have set up at Karbav."

"A peasant would have called me *Baruina*, and not Madame," thought observant Jenny. Aloud she added: "What works do you speak of?" and Markoff Platon replied:

"Those that have been erected by the two overseer-agents of the Company, who say we are to call them Herr Oscar and Herr Alexis."

The Princess and Duchess Dorotéa looked at each other in wonder. But Jenny Trudaine had not failed to remark the peculiar tone in which the peasant envoy pronounced the names. She said:

"Describe these gentlemen, if you will have the kindness!"

Markoff Platon said, after a moment's hesitation:

"The Herr Alexis is little, and lean, and dark,

with a pointed thin beard and a high peaked forehead. He wears gold eye-glasses when he is not twirling them between his fingers—so !”

“Jurnetti !” telegraphed the Princess to the Duchess Dorotéa.

Markoff Platon went on :

“The Herr Oscar——”

“Let me describe him,” said Mademoiselle Jenny, and rose. “He is tall and slender and white-haired, with chiselled aquiline features, and the rosy complexion of a Convent schoolgirl. He has a perfumed white moustache, which he constantly caresses with fingers that are delicate as—say, as mine.” She gave a slight but inimitable caricature of M. le Prince de Sidonia. “His eyelids droop over large grey eyes, not too saintly in their expression when the Herr looks at a pretty woman, for instance.”

Markoff Platon, from haggard-pale, grew scarlet. He stretched out his clasped hands to the Duchess Dorotéa, and fell upon his knees.

“It is all true—all ! Save Ivana Vassily from the loathsome man, Madame ! It is for her sake, more than for the others, that I have journeyed here, almost penniless, nearly starving. Have pity, gracious and noble lady, for I cannot believe you wicked, although you be in league with fiends !”

“*Merci du compliment !*” muttered Jenny Trudaine. But the man had fallen upon his face and lay motionless, and the Duchess Dorotéa, with

strong, beautiful hands, was lifting the great, helpless blond head, laying it on her knee and telling the Princess to ring for cognac and iced water.

"And some *bouillon*," put in Mademoiselle Trudaine, "for the Siberian ambassador is almost starved. I nearly died of hunger myself, in my student days, and it hurt abominably; and I had only the ladder of Fame to climb, not Eastern Siberia to cross. *Pouf!* that was no joke. And all over a woman, too!"

"That reminds me," said Duchess Dorotéa, "M. le Prince is without doubt masquerading as this German Herr Oscar?"

"With his Viennese friend Jurnetti, the clever lawyer," added Jenny, "in the character of the Herr Alexis?"

"Can it be?" cried the Princess.

"Of course!" said Mademoiselle Jenny, unfastening the ambassador's coarse peasant shirt at the neck. An enamelled and diamond-studded reliquary, hanging by a thin gold chain about the massive white throat of the fainting man, caught her quick eye. "A peasant! *la, la!*" she said to herself, and fastened the shirt again as the eyelids quivered, and the great blue eyes unclosed.

"Listen!" said Duchess Dorotéa to the Princess, when her servants had carried Markoff to one of her guest-chambers. "It is hideously plain that there is plenty of pitchblende at the mines, and that M. le Prince de Sidonia has strangely for-

gotten the precepts of *noblesse oblige*, as well as those of Christian humanity. Also, there is the affair of this peasant girl, Ivana Vassily, to be accounted for——”

“As well,” said the Princess, meditatively, “as one million and a half of roubles.”

“Therefore,” went on the Duchess Dorotéa, “when this man is sufficiently revived to travel, I go with him to Eastern Siberia.”

“That will be quite *rigolo!*” declared the Princess. “It is mid-winter, and if you don’t mind jolting, *kibitka* travelling is really amusing. I quite envy you the journey; my husband is so terrible a bore just now with his craze of aviation. He has bought the latest *aéroplane* from a man who invented it, and if I am to be made a widow I should prefer not to see it done!” She added, as an afterthought, “besides, I love you, my Dorotéa, and I will not have you venture alone among wolves and Cossacks and Revolutionaries. So when you start I accompany you!”

“And I am to be left behind to *coiffer* Saint Catherine! . . . Not for a moment,” cried Jenny Trudaine, “do I intend to be left behind! I have never yet been bumped in a *kibitka* over frozen plains. Besides, I have a quarrel with the management at the theatre, or I intend to have, which is the same thing; and a trip to Siberia will bring Messieurs to their senses. And if you refuse me as a companion of your journey, possibly I may blab

the secret all over Paris !” She looked very wilful and wicked and provoking, and her blue eyes twinkled like stars in frost. “What else could you expect of the daughter of a *femme de chambre* ?”

The Princess argued, Duchess Dorotéa explained. All to no good. Jenny insisted on going, and she went. The little party started for St. Petersburg in twenty-four hours.

II.

The railway portion of the journey calls for little remark. The Princess had with her two gigantic Cossacks of His Highness’s guard as body-servants and, if necessary, defenders ; the Duchess of Bellaselva brought an Italian of her household, a hardy Northerner from her own old home, by name ’Tonio Gazzi, the elder son of the peasant woman who had been her Grace’s foster-mother, and who had charged ’Tonio upon her death-bed to be a true and devoted guardian to his young mistress. Markoff Platon, now recovered from his weakness and exhaustion, and showing a feverish anxiety to push on, served as guide for the expedition. To which, Mademoiselle Jenny contributed her sparkling little personality, a tiny Chinese sleeve-dog that never left her, and an equally tiny revolver, charmingly inlaid with platinum and gold.

“You think it too pretty to kill with, eh,

Monsieur?" she asked of Markoff Platon when she showed it him. It was in the single room of a miserable one-roomed log-hut posting-house, where the party had halted to change their wretched horses, and snatch an interval of refreshment and warmth, grouped about the battered and smoking *samovar*.

"Far from it, Madame," answered the blond giant. "Is not a lovely woman the most death-dealing weapon that ever was wielded by the hand of Fate?"

"*That* a peasant!" grinned Jenny to herself, as she fed her sleeve-dog with biscuits she carried. She glanced at the Duchess Dorotéa, and noted that the great grey-hazel eyes of the beautiful woman followed Platon as he rejoined the Cossacks and the Italian servant at their end of the hut.

They had long left Siberian railways and even the humble, flea-haunted Siberian inns behind them; the cold was Arctic, and the feathery snowflakes froze as they fell, for the temperature was forty-eight degrees below zero. Jenny Trudaine had learned what the bumping of the *kibitka* was like, as the clumsy machine hurtled at the tails of the galloping *troika* over the icy furrows of stone-hard snow.

"It is a nightmare!" the Duchess murmured sometimes, as the deadly stinging cold gripped at her heart. Once or twice upon alighting she swooned, and then, thrusting aside those who crowded about her, Markoff Platon seized her in

his powerful arms, shook her, shouted in her delicate ears, rubbed the lax hands and the sweet olive-skinned, blue-veined temples with coarse *vodka* and snow, and recalled her to consciousness.

"It was madness—she ought never to have come!" he muttered, when at length the lovely languid eyes unclosed.

"You are not anxious about the Princess or myself, it appears?" hinted Jenny Trudaine.

"Her Highness is a Russian woman, and you, Madame, are hardy as a *gamin* of the Paris streets," said Markoff Platon, "while *she* is an Italian, who has breathed the balmy air of the South, and drunk of its sunshine all her beautiful life, and this icy wind is death to her. I shall never pardon myself for having let her come!"

"Ah, bah! One can live but once!" said Mademoiselle Jenny, with a shrug. The shrug said: "Truly a fine peasant, this—with *grand seigneur* in every line of his body and every note of his voice!" Aloud she spoke again: "We are not far from our journey's end now, you tell us. After all these dreary, desolate months, that is something to know. Tell me, these peasants of Ortai and Litchinsk—they do not labour in the mines in winter? That must be impossible, surely?"

"They are down in the workings five days out of the six. They live underground like moles. A Cossack guard has been set over them to see that

they do not escape before the hour when they have permission to rise to daylight, and the food their wives and children bring is lowered in the baskets in which they draw the pitchblende up," said Platon, with a heavy frown. "So it was when, eighteen months ago, I left them to bring help. So it is now, unless they are dead?" He made the sign of the Cross.

"And Ivana Vassily?" asked Jenny. The fierce blue eyes flamed out at her in angry misery. His stern, white face grew dark with a rush of blood.

"Hers is a worse servitude even than that to which her father and her brothers are condemned!" he said briefly. "The two Germans at Karbav hold her prisoner. They are great chemists, you understand, and the girl is the victim of their physiological experiments. To gain some accursed knowledge that they seek, I suspect them of drugging her, poisoning her, body and soul, with the radio-active chloride they extract from the crushed mineral the wretched peasants dig for them. And Ivana Vassily was an angel to me when I lay sick and helpless under her father's poor roof. She was my nurse and my doctor, my sister, and ——"

"And lover, perhaps?" thought Jenny. But she looked profoundly innocent as she asked this very uncommon peasant:

"What is the ultimate purpose, do you suppose,

of the physiological experiments of M. Oscar and M. Alexis?"

The blue eyes flashed.

"Oscar is an old *viveur* and *roué*, who denies the existence of God, but would prolong the life He gave for ever, if it could be. Alexis is a man who has reached middle-age without ever having lived, and desires to put back Time, and taste the pleasures he has denied himself hitherto. They needed a human subject to experiment upon. Therefore they kidnapped Ivana, and imprisoned her in their stone fortress at Karbav."

"And you, who love her," cried Jenny, "let them take her?"

"And I, who hold her dear as my own sister, Madame, I fought for her until I was overpowered by numbers. All the men of the village were at the mines when they seized her; only the women and myself—scarce risen from a bed of sickness—were left." His lips were deathly white under the pale golden moustache. "I followed her to the stronghold of her captors. I tried to tear the granite walls down with my bare bleeding hands. In vain I begged those men to have pity and restore Ivana to her mother. Then, finding myself helpless, I said, 'I will journey to Paris and appeal to the company. If they knew what wickedness their agents are guilty of they surely would come to their aid.' And——"

"Why not have gone to Petersburg?" asked

Jenny. "The Emperor is more accessible to petitions than of old, since there is a Duma—or a pretence of one!"

Markoff Platon seemed not to have heard.

"He is a noble who has been exiled for joining the Revolutionary party," said Jenny Trudaine to herself. And she smiled very sagely as she rolled her dainty person in her furs for the night's sleep upon a leather-covered air-mattress in a corner of the noisy crowded posting-house.

The end of the next day's journey brought them to a miserable village, consisting of a double line of snow-covered wooden huts. A few half-starved women and children were creeping about. It was Ortai, and some thin spirals of smoke that rose in the distance beyond a stretch of pine-forest indicated Litchinsk. And a gaunt bare range of hills to the east, snowy and bleak and desolate under the young March moon, contained the ancient silver-workings in whose shafts and tunnels the men of two villages laboured, in cold and darkness and hunger, under the knout wielded by Imperial authority, vested in the rascally persons of H.H. the Prince of Sidonia and Herr Alexis Jurnetti, advocate, of Vienna.

"I have an idea, *cherie*," said the Princess Delidoff to the Duchess Dorotéa, as the three *kibitkas* containing the travellers and their attendants stopped before the largest cabin in the village, and a middle-aged, cleanly peasant woman and a

young girl rushed out and fell upon their knees on the snow at the feet of Markoff Platon, sobbing and blessing him as their deliverer. "It is that we ought, instead of two Cossacks, to have brought a hundred. Three women and four men hardly count against the force M. le Prince and his partner can marshal against us if they choose. For they apparently have quite an army of Cossack mercenaries at their disposal, granted by the Governor-General of the Province, and——"

"And paid out of the million and a half of roubles about which we were so shy of reminding His Highness," said the Duchess Dorotéa, drily, as some carts, laden with loaves of stone-hard, coarse black bread and little yellow cheeses, drawn by shaggy ponies, and guarded by fierce-looking mounted Cossacks, rolled by. The men turned in their saddles and stared at the strangers who had alighted at Ivan Vassily's wooden cabin.

"The news will be at Karbav Works before nightfall," said the wife of Vassily in Markoff Platon's ear. They stood together in the outer room where the agricultural implements were kept, and where the sheepskin *shubas* hung against the wall. The ladies were in the inner chamber drinking tea. The girl Tatiana (sister of the lost Ivana) was with them, spreading their mattresses and furs about the stove, for the cabin was to be given up for their occupation.

"Have you any news of Ivana?" Markoff asked the peasant woman.

"She is living. Tatiana has seen her face four times since you went away at a barred window, high up in the wall. The last time was the day before yesterday. She is terribly changed. Tatiana fell down in the snow at the sight of her. May God be her help, unhappy child! Tell me, *dyedushka*, friend of my soul, what you have planned to do?"

"We drive over there to-morrow, and take the two men by surprise!" said Platon.

"You, with these ladies?"

"And the Cossacks, and the other man. The ladies are the real owners of the Ortai and Litchinsk mines; they represent the whole Company. These two Germans are their paid servants, rascals and thieves, and worse. . . . Well, the rascals will be detected in their cheat and dismissed! We shall turn them out of their stronghold, and recover Ivana!"

"But have you thought?" The simple peasant went straight to the point. "There is a proverb: 'When the slave is the strongest, the master is the slave!' What are four men and three women against all those armed Cossacks that the Germans have got from His Highness to guard them and do their will? Suppose they shoot you down like wolves, then these delicate *baruinas*, with their furs and jewels, and their fair faces like the saints

in the holy *ikons*—they can do with them what they will !”

A tremor passed over Markoff Platon. His face grew haggard, and his blue eyes darkened with sudden fear. He raised his head, and looked over the shoulder of Vassily's wife into the great hazel eyes of the Duchess Dorotéa, radiant and calm under their arching black brows.

“Not while we have our revolvers and can use them,” she said, with her sweet smile. “Madoiselle Trudaine is not the only lady who carries arms.”

Markoff took a long step towards the Duchess and dropped upon one knee at her feet.

“Forgive me, ah ! Madame, forgive me for coming with my prayer for help to your house in Paris !” he said, hoarsely. “Better that I had gone to Petersburg, though it meant another prison, a fresh exile, even death. For I have dragged you and your companions into danger in the strength of my desire to rescue Ivana Vassily.”

“You love her so devotedly ?” the Duchess Dorotéa said, as Jenny Trudaine had done. And Markoff faltered :

“Madame—she—she saved my life ! She found me starving, dying on the *tundra*. She placed me on a hand-sledge and dragged me all the way here. I was ill, almost dying, and she nursed me night and day. She hid me from the Cossacks who were hunting for an escaped prisoner.”

“You were that prisoner?”

Duchess Dorotéa's face was very pale.

He told all his story in a few words.

“I was Count Platon Markovitch, an officer in the Emperor's Third Regiment of Guards. I was falsely accused to my Colonel by a woman who—who wished to be revenged upon me for having secretly joined the Revolutionary Party. I was arrested; there was no trial, only a summary judgment. I was imprisoned at the Fortress of G—for a year, then sent to Siberia. Prison life maddened me when it tamed others, roused in me desperate strength where it enfeebled and killed the rest. I escaped, and Ivana was my guardian angel.”

“Is she beautiful?” asked the Duchess Dorotéa, slowly.

The great blue eyes that gazed upon her own exquisite face alone answered. They said:

“I have forgotten since I looked on you!”

III.

Next day the *kibitkas*, with the three ladies and their armed attendants, drove to the ancient Cossack fortress of Karbav, some seven versts from Ortai.

The fortress was a circular granite wall, pierced with loop holes for musketry. In the centre of the space was an oblong stone barrack, with small,

heavily-barred windows. This accommodated the complicated machinery of the refining-works, which the peasants had set up under the instruction of the Herr Oscar and the Herr Alexis. A tall chimney belched clouds of black smoke, and the deafening noise of a quartz-crushing mill beat painfully upon the ears. High up in the wall of the southern end of the building was the barred window where Tatiana had seen the strange white face that had dumbly conveyed to her the message that Ivana was alive.

"But is she still living?" wondered the man whom she had saved from death. "And if she be, will she read a truth in my face when next she shall look upon it that will be worse than death to her?"

The gates of the fortress were thrown open as the three *kibitkas*, drawn by their belled *troikas* of little, muscular, shaggy horses, approached. Twenty armed Cossacks of the company, lent to the pretended managers of the Profitable Uranium Pitchblende Syndicate by the Governor-General of the Province, turned out in double file, and divided, making a lane of fierce faces and bristling beards and gleaming weapons for the visitors to pass through.

But the Duchess Dorotéa sat in her *kibitka* and did not alight.

"Tell the Herr Oscar that Her High Nobility the Princess Delidoff, Mademoiselle Jenny Trudaine and the Duchess de Bellaselva, representing

the governing syndicate and shareholders of the Company, have come to examine into the accounts of his management," she said coldly, as a little, olive-faced, rat-eyed man, heavily wrapped in furs, appeared upon the threshold of the gate. "You, I presume, are his friend, the Herr Alexis?"

It was Jurnetti, the Viennese lawyer, who had deserted his briefs to follow chemistry. Without disclaiming his *alias* he bowed low to the ladies, stretching out his burned and discoloured hands.

"Be pleased, Mesdames, to enter. Our Cossacks will entertain your followers in their guard-room."

"*Mais, parler clair et net, mon cher Monsieur Alexis!*" said the clear ringing tones of Jenny Trudaine; "we are not quite so simple as to put our heads into the lion's mouth. Who knows but we might vanish as mysteriously as the million and a half of roubles subscribed by the purchasers of our first issue of stock at par! No, no, *mon bon Monsieur!* Where we go we are accompanied by our four bodyguards; take that as sure."

Her light laugh stung a listener. A tall, white-haired, elegant old man, with chiselled aquiline features, swathed to the tips of his delicate ears in splendid sables, appeared in the gateway beside Jurnetti and bowed low in deferential homage.

"When two of the Graces and the Muse of Comedy deign to visit these Arctic regions, the snow melts, the sun shines and the spring hurries to

greet them. But even spring in Eastern Siberia is apt to be nipping. Unless you, Madame la Princess and you, Madame la Duchess, desire, with Mademoiselle Jenny, to be frozen stiff, converted into exquisite statues of ice, with your attendants and horses, you must take shelter within our walls. Mesdames, permit that I escort you!" He offered an arm to the Princess, an arm to the Duchess. Jurnetti, his black eyes sparkling, extended his lean elbow to Jenny Trudaine. Followed by Markoff Platon, Gazzi and their Cossacks, they entered the fortress of Karbav; the *troikas* were led in after them and the gates closed.

"To keep out wolves!" whispered Jurnetti to Mademoiselle Trudaine. She gave him a glance of disdain for his malignant smile.

"The wolf indoors, Monsieur, is sometimes worse than the wolf at the threshold."

She looked about her with bright, observant eyes. The inside of the granite-walled enclosure was littered with huge mounds of blackish yellow stone, broken small for the crushing mill that reared its clumsy bulk at the further end under a rude shelter of planks and canvas. Barrow-loads of powdery crushings were being wheeled away by a few miserable-looking peasants of Litchinsk. The dust of pitchblende made black streaks upon the whiteness of the snow.

"Ah, bah! we are more pleasant within," sneered Jurnetti.

He led Jenny forward, Platon, Gazzi and the Cossacks following. The heavy timber, iron-studded doors of the oblong stone building within the loopholed walls, opened to admit the party. They crossed a flagged vestibule, a guard-room upon one side, servants' quarters on the other, and entered a long room. Heavy beams supported the rafters above; a huge fire of logs burned upon the hearth; a library of works on mineralogy, anatomy, chemistry and physiology filled low bookcases. The walls were hung and the boards of the floor covered with pelts of wolf and bear.

"You will take some refreshment, Mesdames?" inquired the Prince of Sidonia as he offered seats to the ladies, and threw more logs upon the roaring fire, and begged them to remove their furs, and was relieved of his own by the assiduous Jurnetti.

"I thank you, no, Monsieur," said the Duchess Dorotéa. "Our errand is merely to make inquiry into several irregularities of which myself and other members of the Syndicate were informed in Paris recently. First, we wish to know how it happens that your report as to the non-existence of uranium pitchblende ore in the abandoned silver-workings of Ortai and Litchinsk should be so abundantly contradicted by the evidence of our own eyes? Secondly, we would, without inconvenience to yourself, desire to be informed why you, our Perpetual Grand Chairman, and Herr Jurnetti, who is a life director of our Company, are masquerading here

as ordinary employés, and where you have deposited the million and a half of roubles which were paid in by the purchasers of the first issue of stock? Finally, we have to request that you will deliver up into our charge the elder daughter of Ivan Vassily, whom you abducted from the dwelling of her parents nearly two years ago. We know that she is alive," the Duchess added, as the grey, twinkling eyes of M. de Sidonia sought the ceiling, and he twirled his white moustache thoughtfully with a beautifully manicured hand.

"Ah, you know that the young woman is alive, Madame! Good!" said the Prince, whom we will no more call Herr Oscar. "Then I will answer your other questions. Firstly, know that the report of the non-existence of the pitchblende, reaching myself and my partner Herr Jurnetti, decided us upon travelling to Eastern Siberia in the characters of humble agents of the Syndicate, and satisfying ourselves of the truth or falsehood of the statement that had been made. Secondly, we needed money for the journey, and as the million and a half of roubles that had been subscribed for working capital were available, we decided upon employing them in the purchase of machinery for the development of the mineral resources we found, after all, to exist upon the spot. Thirdly, had you not answered the question for yourself, I should have had the honour to inform you that the young woman in question is perfectly well, quite con-

tented with her situation as housekeeper to two elderly bachelors of unblemished reputation——”

“Oh!” exclaimed Jenny Trudaine, as if involuntarily.

“And not at all inclined to relinquish it,” M. de Sidonia ended, smilingly. But his twinkling grey eyes dealt Jenny Trudaine a look of envenomed anger.

The actress did not see it. Her gaze was fixed on Markoff Platon’s death-white face and blazing violet eyes. He leaned against the wall, between the Princess’s Cossacks, and clenched his hands; his great chest heaved and his close blond curls seemed to rise upon his head with rage. Fierce words would have burst from him, but a look from the Duchess Dorotéa had silenced them upon his lips.

“Then, M. le Prince, since this is so, you will permit me, as the deputy representing the girl’s parents,” said the Duchess’s velvety Italian voice, “to see Ivana Vassily, and hear from her own lips her decision to remain with you?”

There was a profound silence, only broken by the breathing of the people in the room and the roaring of the fire. It was Jenny Trudaine, that skilled professional observer, who saw the Prince’s twinkling eyes dart, as if in question, to the crafty face of Jurnetti. She saw Jurnetti’s pale lips shape the word “No!” She struck in, lightly:

“Christian charity, *mon Prince*—possibly misplaced, but Christian charity still—having induced

Madame la Duchesse de Bellaselva to swear upon the Ikons to the parents of your young *protégée* that she would not leave Karbav without having obtained sight and speech of Ivana, your refusal would place our entire party under the unfortunate necessity of remaining here as your guests for an indefinite time."

The Prince bowed and smiled.

"You cruelly tempt me to be obdurate. Nevertheless——"

"Nevertheless," put in Jurnetti, his parchment face creased with a mechanical smile, and his round black eyes furtively watching Dorotéa under their discoloured lids, "M. le Prince will throw no obstacle in the way of Madame de Bellaselva's desire. She is at liberty to visit Ivana Vassily in her apartment if she chooses." He drew a sharp hissing breath, and added: "But she must go there alone!"

"No!" thundered Markoff Platon. The Prince of Sidonia, unmoved and smiling, put up a double eyeglass, framed in tortoiseshell, and calmly inspected the speaker.

"We have met this young man before!" he said to Jurnetti. Then turning to the Duchess, "your decision, Madame?" he said, smiling again very sweetly. "My partner has given you the choice!"

"Make an exception, M. le Prince," said the silvery, ringing voice of Jenny Trudaine. "Permit me to accompany Madame de Bellaselva."

A look passed between Jurnetti and the Prince. Jurnetti instructed with a glance, and Sidonia obeyed. "So be it, Mademoiselle," he said, "your request is granted. Permit me!" He gave his arm to the Duchess Dorotéa, and led her quickly out of the room by a door that was near the huge Cyclopean fireplace. Jurnetti followed with Jenny Trudaine. As she passed Markoff the *comédienne* whispered:

"If there is treachery you will hear a revolver-shot."

"My God!" he muttered, clenching his hands in agony, as the door closed upon the retreating *frou-frou* of silken-lined skirts. "How can I wait—how can I wait for that?"

The Prince fell back to admit of the Duchess's preceding him, as he unlocked a heavy door that confronted them at the end of a stone corridor. Instantly Jenny Trudaine stepped past him and took Dorotéa's arm. There was tenderness in her pale myosotis-coloured eyes, and in the smile that showed the great actress's pearly little teeth as Dorotéa's warm and affectionate look answered to the pressure. Sidonia did not see the glance. He was whispering to Jurnetti.

"*Si la corde ne rompre?*"

Jenny's quick ear caught the words.

"If no hitch occurs—if no accident happens! Ah, ah! Messieurs the conspirators are not quite certain!" She grinned like a mischievous *gamin* as she felt the little revolver safe in its pocket in

her dress and the little snake-skin cartridge-pouch hanging at her waist. She had her Chinese sleeve-dog under her arm, tucked beneath her cape of sables. He wriggled restlessly, and seemed afraid.

They went through several huge, bare, unplastered rooms. A great brick furnace was in the first, and strange machines for sifting the crushed pitch-blende, separating the uranium, and extracting, condensing, and refining the priceless radium chloride, a pound (*avoirdupois*) of which costs £340,000 sterling to produce, and necessitates the employment of 1,700 tons of ore for its extraction. Plans, charts, anatomical drawings, and strangely shaped vessels of glass were in another room, in which stood a table covered with sheet lead, beside which was a curious machine with rubber bands and pulleys, and belts of webbing, all adaptable for the adjustment of senseless weights upon that sinister table.

"Did they lock the door behind them?" wondered Jenny Trudaine, as the Prince and Jurnetti rejoined the ladies. She was brave, but she knew a chill of horror as she noted certain curious details about the room.

"You have seen our chemical laboratory," the Prince was saying in his smooth, false voice. "Now, Mesdames, you behold the studio where our biological experiments are carried out."

"Biology, I think, is the science of life?" said the Duchess Dorotéa, abruptly.

"But certainly, Madame!" acquiesced Jurnetti, with a display of his rat-like teeth.

"And vivisection would be more appropriately named the science of death," pursued the Duchess, with a shiver, as she looked about her at the cases of instruments, the bands and pulleys, the strangely shaped bottles and jars upon the shelves.

"*Sapristi*" exclaimed Jurnetti, coarsely; "you don't suspect His Highness of pithing live cats and isolating the brains of rabbits, and extirpating the nervous centres in guinea-pigs for the sake of adding to his knowledge of the glorious human subject?"

The Viennese spoke with strange heat. An ugly red light flickered in his bright black rat-eyes. Jenny Trudaine, looking at him, suspected that the genius of the lawyer-chemist was allied to insanity. And she suspected something else. What if these two men had buried themselves in this wild and frozen desolation together—not entirely for the purpose of manufacturing radium, not merely to test its efficacy as a therapeutic agent, but to prosecute some terrible course of experiment upon the living human subject, beyond the reach of civilisation's life-protecting laws?

IV.

She had put her tiny finger on the secret, that even Markoff Platon had not guessed, in its hideous entirety, even before the Prince of Sidonia signed to Jurnetti, and the Viennese ex-lawyer, drawing a strangely-shaped key from an inner pocket, drew back a leather curtain, heavily weighted at the bottom, and unlocked a door it masked. Before them was darkness, velvety, intense. Behind them Jenny and the Duchess Dorotéa heard the stealthy closing and locking of the door. Holding each other's hands, they stood, not daring to advance upon the unknown, and their hearts might have been heard throbbing in the silence, as the voice of the Prince said solemnly behind them :

“Advance, Alexis Jurnetti, Master of Experimental Chemists! Supreme Arch-Hierophant in Biology! Within this room thou art supreme. We are but children at thy knees—slaves at thy footstool!”

Someone brushed by Jenny Trudaine in the darkness. She clutched Dorotéa's cold hand tightly. For her life she could not restrain a little choking gasp of sheer fright. And at that she heard Sidonia's little whinnying, evil laugh behind her, and rallied all her powers to fight down fear.

“*Zut alors!*” she called out in the very accent of a *gamin* of her Paris. “Ring up the curtain,

will you, Messieurs! Don't keep us sitting in the dark!"

"Silence!" said the voice of Sidonia behind the women; and it shook and quivered in its suppressed rage. "Do you not see that it is getting lighter? Look—straight before you—and if you are wise, Mesdames, do not either of you advance a step!"

Something glimmered in the blackness. A spot of brilliance appeared, and seemed to hover; it might have been twenty feet distant from where the two women were standing, and at the height of six or seven feet above the level of the floor. Presently it was a lambent phosphorescent radiance, not still and coldly white, but throbbing and pulsating with primary colours, ranging from the darkest and most vivid violet and the loveliest blue to pale green, fading to lemon and yellow, flashing to rose-colour, ripening to ruby-red and ending in a trumpet-note of orange, round a dark nucleus, the nature of which it was not at first possible to define.

"*Mon Dieu!* how beautiful!" muttered Jenny Trudaine. "But the heat, how it oppresses. Is there a furnace near?"

The heat was intense, and in the silence it seemed as if those pulsating polychromatic rays surrounding the nucleus of energy gave off a sound like the fanning of giant wings. And the dark nucleus began to pale and grow luminous.

Now, too, the women were conscious that they stood upon metal, and that a pale, greyish light began to emanate from it. Now they saw that the walls and ceiling of the long room in which they stood were covered with sheets of the same metallic substance, emitting the same pale light, and that there were no windows, only ventilators high up in the wall.

And they saw that the throbbing radiance had for its centre the head of a woman. And presently her face shone out, and it was from that and from her whole body that the light came.

She sat upon a glass chair with a high back, against which her head leaned, and with arms on which her hands rested. Her feet, bare and beautifully shaped, rested on a glass footstool. She was as pale as snow, and on either side of the snow face a plait of golden hair hung down nearly to the floor. She wore the costume of her province, but the Ivana Vassily who had succoured Markoff Platon had never worn rich gleaming silks like these, or a head-dress and necklace and girdle sparkling with gold and jewels. Nor had Ivana's great black eyes ever gleamed with such intolerable appalling brightness.

"*Sapristi!*" thought Jenny, "this must be she—Ivana Vassily! *A la fin vous voila, ma belle*, and what have these two jugglers done to make you look so? Almost one could believe that you were dead, and they had conjured a devil into that lovely

body of yours. Else what is it glares out of your great eyes? Not a woman's soul!"

The voice of Jurnetti broke in upon her thoughts.

"Madame de Bellaselva and Mademoiselle Trudaine, you now are in the presence of my adopted daughter and beloved pupil, Ivana Vassily. Speak to her, since it is your desire. Ask her whether she is happy here, and if she wishes to return to share the poverty of her parents?"

"Speak without fear, I beg of you, Ivana," said the sweet, trembling voice of Duchess Dorotéa. And a strange, expressionless, hollow voice answered her:

"Ivana speaks without fear."

Jenny Trudaine felt the Prince shuddering behind her. A sudden idea flashed across her vivid little brain. Before Dorotéa could speak again, she interrupted:

"You stand too near your subject, M. Jurnetti. One has met with hypnotists in one's time. Oblige by turning your back upon Mademoiselle."

"You are clever, *ma belle* Jenny!" said the Viennese lawyer-chemist, with a rasping laugh. "But not quite clever enough!" He wheeled round with his back to Ivana, and folded his arms upon his breast. "Proceed with your questions, Madame," he said to Dorotéa.

The Duchess continued, growing more and more agitated:

“Do you not wish to return to your parents, Ivana?”

Slowly the hollow answer came from the stiff white lips that were parted, showing the gleaming teeth :

“Ivana does not wish to return !”

“Not even to greet Markoff Platon, who journeyed all the way to Paris to bring help to you ?”

There was a silence that seemed to anger Jurnetti. Jenny Trudaine heard him draw his breath sharply, and stamp his foot upon the metal-covered floor.

“Ah-h !” The Prince drew a hissing inspiration. “So we owe your visit, Madame la Duchesse, to Markoff Platon? A determined, painstaking young man. Well, he shall be rewarded! If Ivana still wishes to marry him, she is free to do so. My partner consents, and for my part I will bestow upon the young people a dower of forty thousand roubles. You are listening, Ivana?” And he laughed his goatish, whinnying laugh.

“I hear,” came the dead, monotonous voice, “but I do not wish to wed with Markoff Platon. I remain at Karbav with the Master !”

In the dimness, in which only the face and form of Ivana showed out dazzlingly clear, with that coruscating nimbus of coloured rays about the head, Jenny Trudaine now extricated her little hand from the trembling grasp of Dorotéa’s larger one. She moved to her right, and nearer the wall. Now she

could see that a glass table stood behind the glass chair in which that strange, mysterious figure sat enthroned, and that a ceaseless stream of brilliant, effervescing particles, proceeding from an orange-sized bulb of glass that was inserted in a block of dull, lead-like metal, supported by the table, ceaselessly sprayed—one can find no better word—upon the back of the head of the seated woman. The mind of the *comédienne* was quick in leaping to a conclusion. Unseen by the Prince or Jurnetti, she drew a step nearer.

Now she could see that the upper part of the bulb elongated into a vertical tube, which had a stop-cock, and a cross-piece bent downwards towards its end, also controlled by a stop-cock, and terminating in a smaller bulb, supported between the padded jaws of a kind of metal vice. And the whole apparatus, on its stand of polished glass behind the glass chair which supported the motionless body of the Russian girl, reminded Jenny Trudaine of something she had seen in the lecture-room of the greatest of French demonstrating chemists. Unnoticed she drew her dainty little revolver and cocked it. The tiny click attracted the attention of the Prince of Sidonia.

“What was that?” he cried angrily, “return to your place, Mademoiselle Trudaine. Do not advance a step nearer, on peril of your life!”

The sharp crack of a revolver answered Sidonia. The glass globe behind the head of Ivana flew into

fragments that were scattered with a tinkling sound. Jurnetti screamed out shrilly with a horrible oath. Instantly the room was plunged in darkness, and with the darkness came the heavy concussion of something heavy and inanimate falling on the metal-covered floor.

"*Sacrebleu!* She-devil of the *coulisses*, you have ruined all!" snarled Sidonia. And the clear ringing voice of Jenny answered back defiantly:

"*Zut alors, mon viellard!* Did you think to take us in with a deception like that? Tell yonder dead woman to speak now, and see if she will answer you! Ah, bah!—stupid that you are!"

There came with the actress's silvery laugh of mockery, a beating on a distant locked door, and a heavy crash as it was broken in, and the rush of men's heavy footsteps across the laboratory and the experimenting-room, and a ripping sound as they tore away the leather curtain, and there was a thunder of axes and rifle-butts upon the metal-lined door that the Prince had locked and bolted.

"Dorotéa!" shouted the voice of Markoff Platon.
"Dorotéa!"

"He does not think of me!" flashed through the mind of Jenny Trudaine. Then a hand passed over her shoulder from behind and covered her mouth, and a sharp, icy pang of anguish pierced her bosom. It was like being burned with a hot iron between the left shoulder and breast, and the revolver fell from her hand.

"A parting gift, Mademoiselle!" said Sidonia's voice. He laughed his little hateful, whinnying laugh. Then footsteps crossed the metal floor. A whiff of icy-cold air came upwards as a trap was lifted, and fell an instant later with a heavy crash. And then—the door that the rescuers assailed gave way to their united efforts.

"Stand back!" cried the voice of Markoff, as a central panel crashed in and pale daylight came through with the clutching hands that wrenched and tore the gap yet wider.

"Dorotéa, are you there? Speak to me, Dorotéa! Bring torches quickly! All here is dark! Ah, speak to me, Dorotéa, for the love of heaven!"

He saw her. She was bending over Jenny Trudaine, supporting the slight figure in a sitting posture. The fair, waved head of the *comédienne* lay helplessly on her breast; a warm stream trickled over the hand Dorotéa clasped her with; her breath came in long gasping sighs.

"Answer him, *ma belle*," the weak voice whispered. "He only asks for you!"

* * * * *

They bore the dying actress from that sinister room, and took up the body of Ivana Vassily, which, now that the strange artificial life maintained in the brain-centres by the constant emanations from the radium-salts the shattered bulb had contained had been withdrawn, presented the

appearance of a corpse long dead, clad in poor and shabby peasant clothes, and placed it in a rudely-improvised wooden coffin for transport to her home. The Prince and Jurnetti were nowhere to be found. The Cossacks of their guard, in default of orders, made no attempt to detain the party. The name of the Princess Delidoff had overawed them, and when her Highness undertook to answer to the military governor of the province for their fidelity and good behaviour, and sprinkled gold upon them from her well-filled purse, they were even content.

Jenny Trudaine died before daybreak. No surgeon, even had a skilful one been at hand, could have staunched that inward bleeding of the wound the long, needle-sharp dagger had dealt her. Whether her murderer had been the Prince of Sidonia or the lawyer-chemist, Jurnetti, she resolutely refused to say.

“My mother was a *femme de chambre*,” she whispered to the Princess, with the ghost of her old gay laugh upon her white lips. “But her daughter can keep a secret.”

She lay silent a little while, her hand in Dorotéa’s.

“*Ma belle*, I may be presumptuous—things will be so soon over,” she said. “I know that you love this brave gentleman, Count Platon Markovitch, and, believe me, his whole heart is yours. In gratitude he would have married the poor Ivana, who saved his life. Count it to him for virtue, that even when he knew that another was the mistress of his soul,

he left no stone unturned to save *her*—poor victim of those strange and terrible experiments. Well, she will rest in peace in her cold grave now, and I—*Mon Dieu*, how I suffer !”

She lay scarcely breathing after the sharp agony passed. Then the white lips moved again.

“Monsieur Platon.”

“Call him !” whispered Dorotéa ; and the Princess rustled softly to the door. He came and knelt beside the bed of planks and cushions, and touched with his lips the little white hand that could shoot so straight with the revolver, and Jenny’s turquoise eyes opened and looked into his that were like dark sapphires under his broad fair brows. And she laughed a little silvery chime.

“*Mon ami*, I always said you were too well-bred for a peasant. You have suffered much, but happier days will dawn for you. Her Highness will obtain your pardon from the Emperor—all will be well !” The turquoise eyes were full of terror. “Who spoke outside ? They have captured the Prince ? They will—tell them I said it was not murder ! Tell them to let him go !”

The Count soothed her, telling her that the Prince and Jurnetti had escaped, with all that was left of the million and a half of roubles, but that the store of radium the shattered bulb had contained, and which had been accumulated by incessant labour during the confederates’ two-years’ residence at Karbav, had been gathered from

the floor of the experimenting-chamber, and would probably recoup the loss of the Syndicate when sold in Paris.

"Let my share be given to the poor," gasped Jenny.

She was suffocating. The strong arm of Platon Markovitch lifted her. Her dying head lay on his broad breast, her hand in Dorotéa's.

"That is better. Thanks. Give me a little kiss when I am dead. My friend Dorotéa will not be jealous. For I knew that *he* would murder me for what I meant to do. Yet I did it all the same." Her silvery laugh tinkled faintly close to his ear. "*Noblesse oblige*. For my mother was a *femme de chambre*, 'tis true, but my father was—a Prince!" said Jenny Trudaine; and died as bravely as any legitimate daughter of the old heroic, noble house of Sidonia!

THE SLUG'S COURTSHIP.

I.

THE interior of the Widow Gammon's modest two-roomed dwelling, was remarkable solely for its strong family resemblance to the interiors of the irregular parallelogram of cottages, similarly built of mud and rubble, that faced each other across the Goose Green of Long Dittoes, in the county of Berks. The dresser boasted, it may be, a gaudier array of "fairings" in juxtaposition with its dangling rows of household crockery, the cooking-utensils in the stall beneath were a shade less sooty, the Windsor arm-chair displayed a chintz-covered cushion of similar pattern to the design of the petticoat flounces tacked over the shallow double-case-mented window, and the high mantelshelf above the narrow cooking-range, the pewter plate and mustard-pot, and the two brass candlesticks that flanked the white-faced clock upon the mantelshelf were polished, as befitted family heirlooms, and the high-backed wooden settle, the seat of which concealed a box for the concealment of extra bedding, was shiny as beeswax and turpentine could make it. Left of the range, a doorway without a door revealed the lower rungs of a ladder-stairway leading to the

garret where Mrs. Gammon was engaged in cleaning; the whitewashed boards forming the ceiling quivered on their worm-eaten joists beneath the widow's ponderous tread.

The white-faced horologe upon the mantelshelf had emitted a rattling noise preparatory to striking, when the church-tower clock chimed the opening bars of "Abide with Me," dropping some notes, and slurring others, and whanged twelve strokes. Simultaneously a sunbonneted shadow fell across the geraniums and calceolarias that were ranged upon the window seat, and Absalom Penny, who was seated on a three-legged stool at the corner of the kitchen table, gloomily eating bread and cold bacon with a clasp-knife, from the advertisement-back-sheet of *The Sunday Intelligence*, reddened, bolted a mouthful only partly masticated, and choked self-consciously.

But the shadow was withdrawn, and Absalom, removing the paper cork from a flat tin bottle that stood at his elbow, had time to interpose the bottom of the vessel between his blushes and the entering visitor, before the door-latch jerked up and a fresh-complexioned, red-haired, rather sharp-eyed young woman of seventeen, known to Long Dittoes as "Wilkes's Susy," appeared upon the worn stone threshold against a background of August sunshine, blooming lavender-bushes and flaming hollyhocks. The sunbonnet she had removed dangled from the plump pink fingers of one hand, the other

hand supported a marketing-basket with two handles and a broken lid.

"So there you be, Absalom Penny," said Susy Wilks the visitor, with ironic emphasis, "and no wonder you baint able to look I in the face!"

Absalom Penny's possible retort was lost in the depths of the tin bottle. When finally he emerged from behind it you might have seen him as a weedy, high-complexioned, narrow-shouldered young man of eighteen, with tow-coloured hair and round pale eyes, garbed in earth-stained corduroy trousers and a calico-sleeved waistcoat, the jacket appertaining to these garments having been removed for coolness, and hanging from a nail at the back of the door. He was further distinguished by an aggressively large and clean shirt-collar of the obsolete Gladstonian brand, and a voluminous spotted neckcloth of extinct sporting fashion, the ends of which hung loose over the sleeved waistcoat, and intercepted his food on the way to his mouth, as he cut and chewed his bread and cold bacon, staring gloomily at the newspaper, with a clumsy pretence of being absorbed.

"Absalom, don't you hear I?" said Miss Wilks, after a pause of dreadful duration.

"Noa!" said Absalom, breathing heavily. As Miss Wilks regarded him with scorn, thrice-retorted, he took refuge among the advertisements. "'Is Your 'Ouse'old Plagewed by Rats?'" he spelt out; "'Put down V-i-r-i-n-e and be Free from

the Pest. 6d. a packet. Cheap at the price.' I wunner if th' stuff 'urts much to take?" he added, darkly conscious of the contemptuous stare that raked him. "But wuther it dew or wuther it doant, sixpence a packet be too dear for me!"

"Abey!" was uttered in a voice that might almost be described as coaxing.

"'Why Live when you can be Buried for Three Pounds Ten by The Eco-nom-ical Funerals Company?'" read Absalom, conscious that Susy had entered, shutting the door firmly behind her. He broke into a clammy perspiration even as he wiped his clasp-knife upon his paper tablecloth, shut the knife, swept up the crumbs of the meal into his palm and swallowed them, returned the knife to his trousers pocket, crumpled the greasy newspaper into a ball, pitched it under the grate, and elaborately became aware of the visitor upwards from her thick-soled, lace-up boots to the well-filled black stockings that merged in a pink print frock covered with a bibbed apron. Something in the rounding contours revealed by the bib weakened his grim determination, the little hollow in the creamy-pink throat under the pointed chin swallowed up the last of his strength. He unhooked his jacket from behind the door and doggedly thrust one arm into a sleeve, but he was failing, and he knew it, as Susy demanded:

"Abey, you're not a-going to pretend as you doan't know why I be here?"

She waited, with blazing blue eyes nailed upon Absalom's. He drove the other arm into the jacket-sleeve and mumbled shamefacedly :

"To see your Aunt Sarah Gammon, o' course!"

He pulled an old-fashioned copper powder-horn from his jacket pocket, shook it at his ear and thrust it back again. Then he picked up a flag-basket from the chimney corner and topped himself with a well-nigh crownless straw hat. In the act of taking an old muzzle-loading sporting gun from the corner where it leaned beside the back door he stole a glance at Susy, and saw her apron at her eyes.

"I doan't want Aunt Sarah," faltered Miss Wilks. Was she really crying? "'Tis you I be come to ask a question of." She added, as Absalom removed his fingers from the gun-barrel and dropped the flag-basket in confusion: "What I wants to ask ye is—be this tale true?"

"Wut tale?" mumbled Absalom guiltily rolling his eyes about the kitchen. They lighted with relief on the tin bottle and a brown teapot that stood upon the corner of the stove. "Wut tale?" He began to refill the tin bottle from the teapot, adding, as a brown puddle spreading upon the sanded brick floor about his boots testified to the unsteadiness of his hands: "'Ow do I know wut kind o' tale you means?" In his desperation he strode to Mrs. Gammon's corner-cupboard, wrenched it open, and with the boldness of despair

dropped ten or twelve lumps of sugar into the tin bottle, and filled up with milk set by for the widow's tea. "Theer be tales an' tales—all diff'rent!" he said gloomily, and drove the bottle-stopper home with a blow.

"This one," retorted Miss Wilks, fixing his whirling eyes with her own relentless orbs as she dropped her marketing-basket on the brick floor and folded her arms upon her heaving apron-bib, "I have just heerd at Simmon's, the grocers, when I went up-along to buy mother half a pound o' Liphook's Luscious Tea." She continued with compelling energy: "Answer I plainly, Abey Penny. Be you a-going to marry my Aunt Sarah Gammon or baint ye?" She unfolded her arms, clenched a pink fist and thumped it smartly on the table. "Answer me—if you never tells the truth no more!"

"Susan Wilks, I be!" shouted Absalom, with unexpected force and loudness. The sound of his own voice encouraged him, and with clenched fist he thumped the table until the tin bottle fell over on its side. "Now you knows, wut ha' you got to say against it?" he went on defiantly, stowing the bottle in the flag-basket, and hitching the strap about it.

"Say against it!" shrieked Susy, goaded to frenzy by this callousness, "why, that Aunt Sarah Gammon be over sixty, an' 'tis child-stealin' for her to marry wi' a lad as young as you! A birdin'

boy, at nine shillin' to week, what her took in as parish boarder when you was nine year old! Why, she did ought to think shame o' herself, an' so ought you, Abey, Absalom—so ought you!"

She sank into the slippery embrace of an American cloth-covered armchair and burst into loud sobs, as Absalom hardily shouldered the flag-basket and took the gun from the dresser-nook.

"Say wut you likes," he told her, hardily. "I've got no time for argeyin' wi' little gells."

"An' me same age as you, all-but a year!" screamed Susy, indignantly.

"Look now!" said Absalom, patronizingly, "what iggerance you be showing! Baint I your uncle—or as good?"

"Not you, nor nothing like it!" returned Miss Wilks, stung beyond endurance. "My uncle were the late Mr. Ezra Wilks, Aunt Sarah's first husband. Why, I wouldn't have you for an uncle, not at a gift!"

"All same, I shall be your Aunt Sarah's third husband an' your uncle by marriage come Wens-day next," said Absalom, still more hardily. In another moment a lump came into his throat and warm salt water brimmed over his eyelids. He leaned the ancient muzzle-loader against the wall and stealthily wiped away the betraying tears with the back of his hand. Susy was crying really now, if she had feigned previously.

"Oh, Abey! Abey!" she sobbed, "however could you go to do it?"

Absalom Penny stared before him, blinking.

"I dunno," he began, and pulled up. "Ay, I do know," he began. His eyes blinked more rapidly, and his mouth worked. "You wouldn't 'ev me, so I throwed meself away!" He collapsed heavily on the stool and dropped his head on the table with a bang, lifted up his voice and wept. "Ow, ow! Hoo-owhoo!" he blubbered. "You—you wouldn't 'ev me, so I've throwed meself away!"

"Don't cry so, there's a dear!" pleaded Susy, dropping on her knees beside the artless mourner. "You 'adn't got nothin' to marry me on if I'd said I'd take ye, had ye now? An' mother be under Aunt Sarah Gammon's thumb, an' Aunt wanted ye for herself, seemin'ly. Blow your poor nose, Abey, dear, an' tell how the old cat got over you?"

But the voice of Absalom Penny's sorrow could not be stilled immediately. It may be mentioned that from the moment of Susy's entrance certain protesting creakings and groanings of the garret floor-boards, due to the overhead movements of a ponderous unseen body, had ceased, as though the conversation previously recorded had possessed some interest for the ear of a conjectural personage above. Succeeding a heavy double bump, and a faint sort of shambling, heavy and somewhat

asthmatic breathing could now be heard in such relation to the kitchen ceiling as to suggest that Mrs. Sarah Gammon was listening above.

II.

"You wouldn't 'ev me——" Absalom was beginning for the third time, when Susy literally stopped his mouth with a loud smacking kiss.

"I will 'ev ye! There now!" she uttered, resolutely.

"An' git me away from Missis Gammon! So cruel fond of I as her be! You'll niver do it—niver!" said Absalom, wagging his dismal head.

"However did she win ye over? Tell your own Susy!" whispered Miss Wilks, in whose bosom curiosity strove with jealousy.

"You'll niver be my Susy, but I'll tull ye. It beganned," said Absalom, "wi' my legs a-gettin' tew long for th' settle, theer."

"You sleeps on settle?" queried Susy, putting her face close to the young man's.

"I does when I doan't fall off," said Absalom. "An' seein' my legs kip gettin' longer an' longer, says Missis Gammon to I o' Sat-day night: 'You be growin' quite a tall young man, Absalom Penny,' says she. 'You'll be fain to take an' git wedded one o' these fine days,' she says. 'No-a, Missis Gammon,' I says, 'I shan't niver leave ye to git wedded.' 'Trewly now,' her says; 'an' bain't you a bit sweet on some young woman?' 'No-a,

Missis Gammon,' I answers back; 'Young wimmen I 'ates like pisen, an' that's the mortal trewth! Especially the slim-figgered, red-'aired, blue-eyed kind.' "

"Oh, you wicked story!" exclaimed Miss Wilks, removing her head from the shoulder of the narrator to shake it indignantly.

"You'd said that very evenin', back o' your feyther's barn, as wut you wouldn't 'ev me——" Absalom began.

"I know. Go on, there's a dear!" begged the remorseful fair one, hastily wiping away the tears that had begun to trickle down the young man's countenance. "Tell us what Aunt Sarah said when you said—you know!"

"She says: 'Well, to be su-er! You do surprise me, Absalom Penny, as thowt blue 'air an' red eyes—red 'air an' blue eyes, I mean!—was your weakness, if any.' 'Noa, Missis Gammon,' I says to her, 'Young wimmin o' the red and blue and pinky-white kind I never could stomach no more than pill-stick and blackjack, an' rather than marry one of they wipers, I'd up an' take an' marry—YOU!'"

Miss Wilks removed the arm that had become entangled with her waist in the course of the narration, and sitting back upon her heels, regarded Absalom with a circular stare, as he continued:

"Says Missis Gammon, a smiling all over her face, like: 'So that's why I sawed three magpies

yestiddy. Well-a-well! I knowed theer sartinly 'ud be a weddin', but niver did I dream it 'ud be mine. An'' she says, 'Me bein' an independent widder wi'out incumbencies an' you an orphan wi' no relations,' says her, 'the sooner Vicar ha' preached us two into one flesh, the better. Banns,' she says, 'bein' but another word for bein' made game of by a pack o' gigglin' young hussies an' grinnin' young foo-uls.' An' so she tells I as we're to be wed by licence—an' she takes me Post Office Bank book out o' th' tea-caddy an' makes me draw out all o' me one pound fifteen shillin' wut I've saved out o' me earnin's to buy the blistered licence wi'!"

Susan uttered a stifled exclamation and sprang to her feet. Standing over the dismal Absalom she commanded, loudly:

"Tell her you won't have her, licence or no licence."

There was an awful pause, only filled by the loud asthmatic breathing of the unseen eavesdropper. Then said Absalom weakly:

"'Tull 'er I wun't 'ave 'er!' . . . But she'll be so mad as niver! Why, her be up-garret to-now, shortenin' Gammon's Sunday trowsies fur me to wear o' Wen'sday, when we're wed."

"Drat Uncle Gammon's Sunday trowsies!" burst out Miss Wilks, indignantly. "Thankful to git out o' wearin' 'em, that's what you ought to be. What collar is that you've got on?"

"It be," replied Absalom, "one o' your Uncle Wilks's dickies."

"I thought I knowed it," commented the late Mr. Wilks's niece. "Be it comfortable?"

"Noa!" replied Absalom.

"Well," said Susy, with bitter emphasis, "the collar you're going to stick your silly head into come Wednesday'll gall ye a long sight more than that." She tied on her sun-bonnet with a quivering lip; picked up her marketing-basket and went to the door. "Good-bye, Abey Penny," she said, at the threshold; "I'm beginning to believe there's another reason back o' this than my having said to ye I wouldn't 'ev ye till you'd saved summat tow'rds 'ousekeepin.' Ah! an' pre'aps two reasons, an' might be three!"

"Wut be they three reasons, seemin'ly?" asked the stupefied Absalom.

"This cottage an' garden freehold for one," screamed Susan shrilly from the threshold. "Rights o' grazin' on th' common for a cow, makes two, an' a hunnerd-an'-twenty pound in the County Bank, three, as I'm a living sinner!"

"By jings!" shouted Absalom Penny, his dolorously drawn-down mouth widening into a grin of rapture, "I niver thinked a thought on that. All I'd in my mortal mind were th' 'owd gun theer." He pointed exultantly to the ancient muzzle-loader leaning up against the dresser, and Susy exclaimed in astonishment:

"You must be cracky. Marry Aunt Sarah Gammon for the sake of Muster Gammon's old gun!"

"'Ow does I get me livin', seemin'ly?" asked Absalom.

Susy answered coldly:

"Weedin' wheat and swede an' tatars an' gatherin' twitch, but mostly by bird-scarin'."

"Can you scare birds wi'out a gun?" demanded Absalom, eliciting the sulky admission:

"Not proper, you can't."

"Ah! An' wheer were I to buy another gun supposin' Missis Gammon had got mad wi' me for up an' sayin' as I didn't want to marry her?"

"You threwed yourself away for th' gun then," said Susy icily, "and not along o' me. Good day, Master Penny. You an' me ha' done wi' one another!"

"Indeed, Miss Wilks, and have us?" said Absalom, in a mincing tone, screwing up his mouth. Next instant the sound of a smart slap reverberated through the kitchen.

Absalom dived in the direction of the slapper, and catching her as she jerked up the door-latch, strove to exact in payment for the stinging patch above his jaw the saccharine tribute of a kiss.

As he desisted for lack of breath—for Susy resisted vigorously—heavy footsteps overhead made the planks of the ceiling quake upon the joists that bore them, and the voice of Mrs. Gammon cried from the stair-top:

"Abey Penny, who be you a tellin' wi' down-along in theer?"

III.

Upon the face of Absalom, now bleached with sickly terror, a flaming patch bore witness to the virgin strength of Susan's arm. The Adam's apple in his long throat jerked as he stammered :

"Noabody, Missis Gammon, but Wigget th' knife-grinder as looked in for a job."

"Tull he theer be nort for him!" said the voice from the stair-top; "an' fill th' tea-kittle!"

"Ay, Missis Gammon," returned her miserable thrall.

As the widow's elephantine footsteps retreated from the stair-top, and Susan, nodding, made another feint of departure, Absalom gasped, with a weak clutch at the hand that had cuffed him :

"Wait on! I wants to speak to ye!"

"I can't," said Miss Wilks, with a dreadful air of briskness, "I wants to fare up-village and buy mother her pound o' tea. Besides, I promised Bill Hickson I'd walk out wi' him this evenin,' soon as I'd settled it to-rights about you an' Aunt Susan, and I've a new 'at to trim by then."

"Don't ye 'ave nort to do wi' Bill Hickson!" gasped Absalom, "don't—an' I'll do it as suer as death!"

"You mean you'll tell Aunt Sarah you bain't

goin' to marry her?" demanded Susy, with promptitude.

"Ay!" said Absalom, fetching a deep breath.

"Then I won't walk out along wi' Bill Hickson this evening," said Susy, permitting her deepest dimple full play.

"An' you will 'ev me?" stipulated Absalom.

"I will when you've told Aunt Sarah what you're going to," said Susy relentlessly. "Git on an' tell her now! Shout it to 'er up th' ladder. Come on, why don't you begin?" she added, scornfully, as the unhappy Absalom squared his narrow shoulders, thrust out his lower jaw and struck an attitude of determination, belied by his deadly pallor and the knocking of his knees. "You're a great big cow-erd, that's what you are!"

The wretched youth strove to reply, but the ceiling quaked again, and his feeble utterance was drowned by the voice of Mrs. Gammon.

"Abey Penny, Abey!" she cried, "baint you iver goin' to git along back to the field?"

"E'es, Missis Gammon!" piped Absalom, in the voice of a six year old.

"Joe Widgett!" shouted the widow.

"He 'ears ye, Missis Gammon!" lied Absalom.

"Tull 'im to drop in at Thomas Trudgett's," said the voice of Fate from the ceiling, "as ye go along-up village, an' tull Thomas the good news about you and me! An' bid him gie Muster Trudgett my complements, as I'll be main pleased

if he'll drop in this evenin' an' drink a cup o' tea!"

"I'll tull he, Missis Gammon," said Absalom feebly.

His whirling eyes lighted on Susy, who seemed to be performing a kind of red Indian war-dance, clapping her hands in dumb show and nodding violently. The thought that frustrated passion might have unbalanced the seat of reason had hardly occurred to him before she rushed at him and put her mouth to his ear.

"Abey, you silly gaby," she whispered excitedly, "I've found out Aunt Sarah's motor. No, don't gape at me. I don't mean the kind o' motor that makes th' dust an' kills th' dogs, but the other sort as makes people do queer things. An' Thomas Trudgett be Aunt Sarah's motor or my name's not Susan Wilks!"

"Owd Tom Trudgett. . . . Why, wut——" Absalom was beginning, when the slow dawn of an idea glimmered behind his round pale eyes. "O' course," he said slowly, "all th' folk in Long Dittoes do know as Trudgett ha' courted Missis Gammon on and off, by an' by times, fur more than thirty year."

"That's it," panted Susy; "an' so mortal slow were Trudgett, that fust Uncle Ezra Wilks got in an' got 'er after courtin' her six years, and then Muster Gammon, he cut in an' got her after waiting on 'er for fifteen. Gammon he've bin dead

nine years, an' Trudgett be no forrader than he were at th' beginning. So I shouldn't wonder but you're a-goin' to git 'er, unless Thomas steps in!"

"I doan't want to git 'er!" said Absalom with rebellious loudness.

"You will if you don't watch out sharp," said Susy, at the front door. "Strike a blow for freedom, Abey, an' remember to strike hard!"

She really went away this time, because with attendant groanings and crackings of the staircase-ladder, a pair of stout feet clothed in extra-sized list slippers, and furnished with ankles resembling stockinged sofa-bolsters, had appeared upon the upper treads. These extremities gradually lowered the bulky person of the widow Gammon into view.

You beheld the widow as a short, bulky, red-faced woman of some fifty-nine summers, with little sharp grey eyes, features of no known order of architecture, a bay-coloured front of hair in striking contrast with the back part, which was of indeterminately greyish hue, and enclosed in an aged black chenille net, not innocent of grease. She was upholstered rather than attired in a black and lavender flowered print gown, a checked apron of voluminous size covered a white one invariably exposed for callers, and she carried under her left arm a pair of black cloth trousers of vast dimensions and old-fashioned make, and in her right hand a formidable pair of scissors.

"Were that Widgett popped out front door as I

comed down-along?" asked the widow as she landed her list slippers on the rag mat.

"O-ay, Missis Gammon," said Absalom, uncandidly. The widow gave him a sharp glance, and said, looking towards the window :

"'E must find a cotton sunbonnet a nice protection to 'is 'ead this warm weather.'" She added, as the stricken youth's jaw fell at this potent thrust :
"You sims to be gittin' nicely over your 'atred for blue eyes an' red 'air !"

"O-ay, Miss Gammon !—I means no-a, Missis Gammon !" babbled the stricken young man. He covered his confusion by shouldering the flag-basket and taking the gun from the dresser-corner. "If ye please, Missis Gammon, I be goin' back to th' wheat-acres," he mumbled, with averted eyes.

"Lucky I ain't a jellis nater like pore Wilks and pore Gammon," sighed the widow, removing a large brass pin from the bodice of her gown and beckoning the reluctant youth to approach. "Come here and let me pin on these an' take your measure before you goes, Abey. Turn yer back, wull ye ! Ah, dear ! Too long by a foot they be, and that wide 'tis wonderful," she murmured, holding the garments against the small of Absalom's back and estimating with a discontented eye that ample length that trailed upon the floor. "You'll niver be so fine a man as were Enery Gammon, Absalom Penny, not if you lives to a 'underd. Well, well !

I 'ope I shall be 'appy!" said Mrs. Gammon, and drove in the brass pin.

"Owch!" squeaked the sacrifice, prancing in torture.

"Wut be wrong wi' ye?" said the widow acrimoniously. "You be so ock'erd as a colt in a medder, bye!"

"Plaize, Missus Gammon—owch!——" pleaded the sufferer, "theer be summat sharp—owch—owch! runnin' into me back—like!"

"Drat the bye!" ejaculated the widow, pettishly. "Why didn't ye up an' say so before?"

"Plaize, Missis Gammon——" began Absalom earnestly.

"Owd yer tongue, wull ye!" snapped the irascible Mrs. Gammon. "Noa," she soliloquised as the elderly will, earnestly considering the late Mr. Gammon's discarded integuments, "to cut 'em 'ud be a sin! 'Sides noabody do know when a bye like you 'll stop growin'. I'll turn they trowsies up from the bottoms inside," she added, suiting the action to the word, and taking more brass skewers from the front of her bodice. "I'll pin 'em an' tack 'em, an' if you feels a bit too overdressed about th' feet at fust, you'll soon git used to it. Wun't ye, bye?"

"Ay-a, Missis Gammon!" acquiesced Absalom hopelessly.

"Ah well!" said Mrs. Gammon, repeating her former aspiration, "I 'ope I shall be 'appy!" She

drew the chintz-cushioned Windsor chair towards the window, took a large brass thimble and a reel of strong black thread from her pocket, and a formidable darning-needle from her bodice-front, seated herself and prepared to sew. "Git along to your work," she said, as she bit off a length of thread and stabbed it at the needle; "and as you pass by Thomas Trudgett's cottage, gi' him Mrs. Gammon's complements an' say I'll take it as but neighbourly if he'll drop in an' drink a cup o' tea. For I'll lay that pert wench Susy 'ud niver gi' th' messidge."

"E're be Mister Trudgett comin' now," said Absalom staring. He held the unlatched door wide open and pointed to a well-known figure in the act of advancing down the front garden path between the lavender bushes, gripping in one gnarled and brown right fist a knobby blackthorn stick of formidable dimensions, and dragging with the other hand a red-faced and unwilling captive. . . .

"Wut be Thomas bringin' that wench Susy Wilks in along-o' he fur?" inquired Mrs. Gammon acidly, as she slipped off her checked stuff apron and revealed the white one sacred to company. She added, with a coquettish glance at the matronly reflection presented in the shiny surface of a copper warming-pan: "Be my 'air pretty tidy, seemin'ly, Absalom?"

"Ay! Missis Gammon," said Absalom, at the door.

"'Ev ye eyes i' your back then, gaby?" snapped the widow.

“Ay, Missis Gammon!” faltered Absalom, retreating behind the door in an agony of apprehension as Thomas Trudgett rapped upon it with his stick, thrust it strongly back against the wall, and exclaimed in a loud, gruff, hearty voice, familiar to the echoes of Mrs. Gammon’s dwelling :

“Be ye to-home-along, Sarah Gammon, I say?”

IV.

The ancient wooer of Mrs. Gammon had been gardener to the late squire of Long Dittoes, and though now retired upon savings, augmented by the Old Age Pension, was still in request as a jobbing man. You saw him as a lean, hale, Roman-nosed, weather-beaten septuagenarian, standing about six feet in his old-fashioned country highlows. Bushy grey-black side-tufts of coarse hair peeped from under a prehistoric white felt stove-pipe. His narrow twinkling eyes, shaded by bushy black and white eyebrows, were set in a walnut-brown mask of wrinkles; he wore a spade-shaped beard beneath the chin, and a coarse red and white cotton neckerchief twisted in a strangle-knot round the collarless band of a shirt of blue ticking. His nether limbs were clothed in proof armour of corduroy, his waistcoat was of the same indestructible material; his double-breasted blue

cloth coat possessed a full set of polished brass buttons, and in an earth-brown right hand he grasped the knobbed blackthorn previously referred to. The other hand still towed behind him the flushed and unwilling Susan Wilks.

"Come in, come in, Muster Trudgett," said Mrs. Gammon hospitably. "You're main early for tea-time, but kindly welcome all same. Sit ye down, do!" She relinquished the Windsor chair in favour of her visitor, and added, wakening the sulky fire with an attenuated kitchen poker: "So you've heerd th' news, seemin'ly?"

"Up to tap o' th' Pure Drop," said Trudgett, pulling Susy forward, "where I looks in for th' pint o' four-arf as I 'as arter dinner. Comin' out I meets wi' the blooshin' bride-to-be. Wheer be Absalom! Her tow'd I Abey were heer-along." His small twinkling eye lighted upon the shrinking form of Absalom. "Why, theer he be," bellowed the jovial visitor, "hidin' behind th' door, seemin'ly. Come out, sonny, come out! I wants to wish ye joy like. She's young an' so are you. All th' more time fur courtin'. Buss her, Abey lad, buss your bloomin' bride-illect, or you'll force me to do it for ye!"

"I've tulled ye, Muster Trudgett, I bain't no bloomin' bride-elect! I wouldn't 'ave Abe Penny, not if 'e was 'ung with dimonds!" protested Susy, scarlet to the roots of her hair.

"That's what all the wenches do say," said

Trudgett cheerfully, taking off the tall white hat and producing from it a red-spotted handkerchief, "Buss 'er, Abey! Dod gass it, bye, why d'ye hang back?"

"As I doan't want to buss 'er, please Muster Trudgett," faltered the unhappy Absalom, acutely conscious of the widow's eye.

"An' a good job you don't," said Mrs. Gammon, transferring her reproachful gaze to Thomas Trudgett, who was polishing his head and mopping his face and wiping his neck with the red-spotted handkerchief, to an accompaniment of such noises as are associated with the toilet of a horse. "You as be to stand up wi' I afore Vicar come nex' Wen'sday, an' swear to love an cherish till death do us part."

"Phew!—Dod gass it!—what be ye talkin' 'bout?" exclaimed Mr. Trudgett, dropping the red pocket-handkerchief into the depths of his tall hat, and elaborately rounding his principal features into an expression of stupefied surprise.

"Wut I've told ye all along, you stoopid old hammer-'ead!" burst out Miss Wilks, in shrill protesting tones. "'Tis Aunt Sarah Gammon Absalom Penny be goin' to marry, an' I wishes 'er joy o' the gaby, that I dew."

"As I'll thank you not to becall your Uncle Penny," said the widow, trembling with indignation.

"I don't want no sick scarecrow for an uncle,"

retorted Susy, whose cup, long full, had now run over; "nor no more would you for a 'usband if there was a man to be 'ad!"

"The ockard young vixen!" gasped the irate Mrs. Gammon, as the door slammed behind her niece's retreating skirts. "Well, Thomas, you knows th' truth now, an' I'm sure I 'ope I shall be 'appy!" She continued, as the kettle she had set upon the range began to simmer: "Abey Penny, you git along to field, as ain't wanted 'ere."

"A-ay, Missis Gammon!" said the miserable slave, picking up for the fourth time his bag, and taking the late Mr. Gammon's old muzzle-loader from behind the door.

"Now no stoppin' to play marbles, or spendin' money on Mother Smiley's brandy-balls," snapped the widow.

"I can't," retorted Absalom, turning, as even the trodden-on worm is said to do, "you takes all o' my wage for lodgin' an' victuals!"

"An' thank your stars I does," said Mrs. Gammon sternly. "Who'd wash and cook fur ye if 'twarn't I?"

"Dunno, Missis Gammon!" mumbled Absalom, retreating.

"Hoy!" cried Thomas Trudgett, as the back view of his fortunate rival presented itself to his view. "Dod gass it! wut's the bye dranglin' be'ind?"

"You, Penny! Stop!" cried Mrs. Gammon,

pursuing her retreating victim into the garden. "You be carryin' off Gammon's Sunday trowsies! My 'eart alive!" she panted, arresting the hopeless footsteps of Absalom and retrieving the garments, "bye, you be little bettter nor a foo-ul!"

"Sin' you fare to think so, Missis Gammon——" began Absalom, with a desperate effort, "maybe——" Meeting the widow's steady stare his liver turned to water. His Adam's apple jerked, and his pale eyes bolted from their sockets. He gulped and said no more.

"Maybe wut?" asked Mrs. Gammon icily.

"Seemin'ly, Missis Gammon——" gasped the quailing Absalom.

"Seemin'ly wut?" demanded the widow.

"Nort, Misses Gammon!" said Absalom hopelessly, and slouched down the garden-path and out at the gate. His betrothed looked after him with an enigmatical expression, sniffed and returned to the house.

"You was always such a man for your tea as niver," she observed smilingly to her guest as she entered. "I'll fare to lay the cups to-once, seein' kittle's on th' bile."

She moved about, briskly enough, considering her years and proportions, spreading a coarse white cloth on the company end of the red-legged deal table, setting out two blue breakfast cups, a home-made loaf of pale greenish hue and astonishing

weight, a pat of fresh butter and a glass pot of gooseberry jam. Thus she moved, and the twinkling eyes of Thomas Trudgett followed her, as he sat well forward in the Windsor chair, with his earth-brown hands upon his knees. As she ladled the tea into the carefully-warmed pot he sighed like the exhaust-valve of a road-engine. Thumping a fist upon the table until the cups clattered in their saucers, the gardener exclaimed :

"Dod gass it, Sarah! You be lost to me again!"

"Ah!" said Mrs. Gammon looking into the teapot, perhaps in search of the years that had fled. "An' whose fault be that, Thomas?"

"Lost to me!" continued the gardener, as one absorbed in retrospection. "For the third time i' thirty years!"

"Ah!" said Mrs. Gammon again, going to take up the kettle. "Drat it!" she cried, "all th' water be biled away! That gaby Abe niver filled it arter all my tellin'. Well, well," she continued, with a leniency due to the presence of a rival, "byes will be byes, as the sayin' is."

"An' gells will be gells, an' wimmin wimmin," interpolated the gardener reproachfully. He added with an unsubdued twinkle, and a clearing of the throat that began as a chuckle: "Just as I were a-comin' your way-along, slow but su-er, as my manner be."

"So you say," retorted the widow, bridling,

"but," she added, filling the kettle from a bucket with a dipper, "yours be a slug's courtship, Thomas Trudgett, an' 'ev. bin from the fust."

"Slow but su-er!" repeated Trudgett cheerily, as Mrs. Gammon replaced the refilled kettle on the fire, and, pending the water's boiling, sat down in the other Windsor chair, and began to tack up the turning at the bottom of a trouser-leg. "Slow but su-er!" the gardener continued; "an' I be wuth waitin' for, I mid tell ye. A fine, bold, 'earty man o' my years. Eh, woman, eh?"

He broadened his chest, squaring his elbows, and the widow sighed as she regarded him.

"I doan't go for to deny it, Thomas. Well, well, I 'ope I shall be 'appy!" she said, dolorously.

"An' so do I 'ope it, Sarah," said the gardener, largely, "though to be plain wi' ye, if I drawed my last breath this minute, you've gaped at the camel an' swallowed the gnat."

"Meanin' Abe Penny," said Mrs. Gammon, back-stitching. "Ye do see, Thomas, as Abey be a single orphan, wi' nobbody to fend for he, an' I be sim'larly a double widder wi'out a man to carry coal, or dig in gardin' or clean pigstye—an' so it come about."

"Talkin' o' pigstyes," said Trudgett, with interest, "how be your pig?"

"Never better i' his life," said Mrs. Gammon, clinging to the thread of her discourse, "as true as I be sittin' here, shortenin' Gammon's Sunday

trowsies for Absalom to marry me in come Wen's-day. It'll be a quiet weddin', Thomas, by licends, as ye've heerd, an' when Vicar hev' preached our two fleshs into one, us'll walk to th' churchyard an' look at th' 'lotment wheer pore Wilks an' pore Gammon be a-lyin' side by side wi' my little bit between 'em." The pathos of this causing the widow's tears to flow, she murmured, wiping her eyes with Gammon's discarded integuments: "For Absalom woan't 'ev me always, Thomas, it bain't i' human nater! I've promised him, if he's a good lad, as 'e shall lay acrost our feet!"

"Come, come!" said the gardener, encouragingly.

"Well, I 'ope I shall be 'appy," continued Mrs. Gammon, unbosoming herself at the touch of sympathy. "But theer's a cloud to every silver linin' an' that theer Absalom's appytite be mine. 'E throws 'isself on a slack-baked quartern like a hogrey. An' as for cold bacon——"

"Talkin' 'bout bacon minds me, Sarah——" began the gardener.

"But if 'e thinks," said Mrs. Gammon, "to git luckshuries wi' me 'e'll find 'isself mistaken. Dumplin' afore meat, is wut my 'usbands 'ev allus 'ad, an' margarine 'thowt butter, or lard. It stands to reason——"

"Hem hem!" coughed Trudgett, shuffling his highlows noisily upon the sanded brick floor and getting up; "touchin' on lard putts pig i' my

'ead. Till kittle biles up I'll fare to 'ev a look at 'e."

"If you dew," said Mrs. Gammon, dropping the late Mr. Gammon's trousers, and rising in majesty, "it'll be over my dead corpse!"

"Dod gass it, woman! wut be wrong wi' ye?" exclaimed the backward wooer in elaborately-feigned astonishment.

"You be wrong wi' me, Thomas," said the widow, shaking her head at him. "'Ev'nt pigs come betwixt you an' me, ah! an' from the werry fust?"

"Pigs be my fancy," said the gardener stubbornly, "an' that I don't deny!"

"An' well I knows it to my cost!" said the widow, reproachfully. "Poor Wilks tokened me more than thirty year ago, while you an' pore feyther was argey-bargeyin' over a litter o' suckin'-pigs. An' fifteen year later, pore Gammon 'e stepped into pore Wilks's shoes while you was settin' up o' nights wi' your gre-at black sow." Tears began to run down Mrs. Gammon's large countenance. "An' now, nine year from," she wailed, "another pig steps in an' parts us. O, dear! it be enough to break a body's 'art, it be!"

"Tsch, tsch! Come now," said the gardener soothingly, "ye doan't mean to up an' call Absalom Penny a pig?"

"Noa!" sobbed the widow, "but I could find it in my 'eart to call summun else one!"

"Meanin' me?" suggested Trudgett, drawing

nearer to the agitated widow, and winking in his characteristic manner as he patted her on the back.

"Come, come, Sarah," he urged, "you knows if I be a slow man I be a su-er man, and I've allus meant to wed ye one o' these fine days."

"Then tek Wen'sday," said the widow plumply, "whether 'tis fine or whether it bain't."

"Dod gass it, Sarah!" growled Trudgett, "what a mortal hurry you're in. Can I snitch ye out o' Abey Penny's jawses, at th' last minute, seemin'ly? Why, wut 'ud Vicar say to that?"

"I'll tull ye wut 'e did say," said Mrs. Gammon, visibly brightening, "when I tooked Absalom an' the licends an' showed en to he. 'Ye be aweer Missis Gammon,' says Vicar, 'as this be a pecooliar bis'ness. The male contrackin' party be a legal hinfant an' the female contrackin' party be over middle age. Wut do th' bye's parints an' garjins say to sich a onion?' Then I ups and minds him as Absalom Penny hev'nt got no parents an' I be th' only garjin' 'e ever 'ad, 'cept th' Parish. 'An' wut 'ave ye to say to this, my lad?' asts Vicar o' Absalom, an' Absalom 'e drops 'is jaw an' gapps at Vicar wi' his mouth wide open. 'E niver were one to say much,' says I to Vicar, 'tis a owd 'ead on young shoulders.' Says Vicar: 'An' as though one owd 'ead on young shoulders wasn't enough, Misses Gammon, you be a-goin' to putt another owd 'ead theer!' Now wut did th' man mean?"

The eyes of Trudgett twinkled more and more, and a mirthful convulsion, beginning at his legs, agitated his vast waistcoat and the ends of his neckerchief before a tremendous "Haw, haw, HAW!" escaped his grinning mouth. "Dod gass it!" he roared, slapping his thigh with a report that rivalled the detonation of a fog-signal, "'Twere your owd 'ead as Vicar meant . . . haw, haw! Well, I never!"

"Thomas Trudgett," said the widow icily, "you best go an' see th' pig. His be the com'ny ye be best fitted for!"

"Maybe, maybe," said the gardener getting up, "but I've known ye think different. Why what an ock'ard woman you be. Wut be matter?"

"The matter be," confessed the widow, "that the names i' th' licends bain't filled in on 'count o' Vicar's scruples. 'Take three days to consider on it,' says he, 'Missis Gammon,' he says, 'an' bring the bye up to Vicarage arter tea o' Monday. Or maybe, Missis Gammon,' says 'e, 'a more suitable-aged partner. Anyhow,' he do say, 'us'll leave it till then.' An' by th' look in his holy eye, too reverend to be a wink, yet not far off of it, I seed as plain as plain could be, as Vicar were thinkin' o' you."

"Nort 'e!" said Thomas Trudgett, reaching his tall stove-pipe hat from the top of the chest of drawers, and taking his blackthorn from the chimney-side. "Nort a bit of it! Take my advice,

Sarah, as is friendly given, an' lay on the bed you've made for the third time. Marryin' be a sollim thing."

"And buryin' be a sollimer," retorted Mrs. Gammon. "You'll be berried afore you're married, an' so I tull ye plain."

"Nort a bit, nort a bit," opposed the gardener cheerfully. "I be a slow man an' a su-er man, an' though I wouldn' wish no ill to that pore pup Abey Penny, in twenty year or so, if you've luck, you may git I for your fourth." He added, as simultaneously with the boiling of the kettle the loud and angry grunting of a pig made itself heard from the rear of the premises: "Your pig be a bit shuff, seemin'ly. 'As 'e 'ad 'is swill? Noa, for theer's his bucket standin' nigh th' back door. I'll feed he while you wets th' tea, an' be back by time 'tis drawn."

He caught up the bucket and vanished through the back door. More grunting was succeeded by a squeal or two, then came silence.

Mrs. Gammon took the brown teapot from the range, and emptied the tea-leaves it had contained into the ashes. As she put in fresh tea from the brown canister, somebody thumped heavily on the front door.

V.

"My 'eart alive, girl!" cried Mrs. Gammon, dropping the teapot-lid into the steaming pot as Susy Wilks re-entered without ceremony. "Wut have ye come for, scarin' I to death?"

"I've come to ask ye a plain question," said Miss Wilks, firmly placing upon the table the market-basket she carried. "Answer as if you was lyin' on your dyin' bed. Which o' they two do ye favour to marry?"

"Trudgett o' course, if I could git he," replied Mrs. Gammon shortly, setting the tea on the range to draw.

"An' 'spose I 'elped you for to get him," asked Susy, "what would you give I?"

"'Pends wut you wanted," returned her aunt. "Wut do ye want?"

"Absalom Penny!" stated Susy promptly.

"I wunner at your taste, I do," said Mrs. Gammon, slicing bread from the household boulder.

"You was willin' to take Abey yourself, I reckons," said the niece, with acrimony.

"Maybe so an' maybe not," replied her aunt, with unexpected placidity.

"But s'pose Abey didn't want to take *you*?" suggested Susan.

"'E'd 'ev to," said Mrs. Gammon, with brevity, "whether he wanted or didn't."

"Woan't you be jellis of a husband so young-like?" queried Susan eagerly.

"Jellis of a bye what I've cuffed th' 'ead of sin' 'e were nine year old! Nort likely. An' what I clings to is the knowin' as Absalom woan't be jellis o' me. He be too young, an' soft, an' back'ard. Now pore Wilks he wouldn't ha' let me look at th' moon if he could ha' helped it, because folk tell theer be a man in it, an' pore Wilks were nort to pore Gammon. As for ragin', ravin', tomcat jellisy, that theer man were a fair masterpiece. Fill the sugar-bowl from th' cupboard canister while I go call Muster Trudgett." She hurried to the rearward door, opened it and called her niece to her side to witness the spectacle of the pig-lover hanging over the side of the pig-stye, rapturously contemplating its porcine occupant as he noisily sucked down his swill. "Thomas!" she called, and receiving no answer: "Drabbit the man," she snorted angrily, "I'll 'ev to go an shake he, theer's no 'elp else."

Susan set back the tea, now in process of being overdrawn, and helped a struggling fly out of the milk. "Why can't I get Abey out o' his muddle as easy?" she muttered, contemplating the rescued insect. "Better be dead than mis-rable I reckons," she added, unreflectingly inverting the metaphor, and promptly decapitated the sufferer with the handle of a spoon, as the lank-haired head of Absalom Penny, in a nimbus of ragged-brimmed

straw hat and a garotting collar, rose over the hedge of flourishing geraniums and calceolarias that excluded light and air from the dwelling-room. He whistled cautiously, and Susan jumped, saying, as she caught her breath :

“O, Abey ! what a start you did give me !”

“Wut say ? ’ev’nt ye had noa luck ?” asked Absalom.

“Noa !” said Susan, “you’ll ’ev to stand up wi’ she before Vicar o’ Wednesday unless you can do one thing.”

“Wait on. I be a comin’ in.” Absalom’s head disappeared from the window to reappear crowning the entire personality of the hero of this rustic love-drama. “Now wut be I to dew to git out o’ marryin’ Missis Gammon ?” he demanded, putting down his flag-basket and the gun, and presenting to the observation of Miss Wilks an aspect of determination hitherto foreign to him. “Quick, say now, while I feels the power of it. Fur I’ve found a threepence goin’ up village, an’ dang me if I ’ev’nt spended every martel penny o’t in Mother Smiley’s strongest brandy-balls an’ sucked ’em all up. Leastways, all but four.” He exhibited the delicacies.

“I be ashamed of ye,” said Susan, secretly admiring the prodigal ; “but do you reckon you could be jealous of Aunt Sarah ?”

“Jellis o’ Mother Gammon ?” asked Absalom, grinning. “Love-jellis, d’ye mean ?”

"I mean that jealous as you couldn't abide her to look at the moon," said Susy, "because folks say there's a man in it. Regular raging tomcat jealous. I believe if you could pretend to be, an' do it life-like, Aunt Sarah wouldn't have you arter all."

"It be worth tryin'," pondered Absalom; "but how be I to begin?"

It was now Susy's turn to ponder.

"If you could manage," she said, presently, "to look like the gentleman in last week's number o' the *Penny Romancer* I've got here." She continued, taking a much-thumbed novelette from her pocket and unfolding it: "He's a nobleman born, wi' a coronet an' a castle, an' a lady-love, an' a wicked rival what steals Lady Imogene's 'eart away. See 'im threatenin' to shoot 'is rival wi' a pistol in th' picter on the cover. Look!" she added, prodding at the page with a pink finger. "That be the Countess Ermytrude, the other young lady what loves him trewly, beggin' him on 'er bended knees to yield Lady Imogene to 'is rival, for her sake."

"Could ye carry on like 'er, d'ye think?" suggested Absalom.

"I lay I could," said Susy. "Here be Aunt Sarah an' Trudgett as smilin' as two baked apples. Come along o' me!"

"Wut for?" began Absalom.

"I'll show you wut for," whispered Susy, seiz-

ing him by the jacket and dragging him unresisting, towards the front door. The kitchen of the cottage was empty when its mistress and her ancient suitor returned, and sat down to tea.

"You'll take a drop o' rum i' your cup, I know," said Mrs. Gammon at a later stage of the banquet, reaching a green bottle from the corner-cupboard and fortifying Trudgett's tea. "An' another lump o' sugar?" she added, tenderly.

"Smile on it, Sarah," said the gardener, "an' one 'll be enough."

"Dear, dear!" said the widow, sighing, "you be main complemendery all of a sudden. Take another bit o' cake, you allus praised my bakin'. Wut part of a pig did you say you favoured? I'll be killin' come September, ye knows."

"Gammon!" said Trudgett, swallowing a wedge of home-made cake, and twinkling at the widow tenderly.

"Ah, deary me!" sighed Mrs. Gammon, pouring rum into her own tea, and sipping it with a pensive smile.

"Don't be down-'earted, you," said Trudgett, spurred by Jamaica to the point of declaration. "You'll git me yet, I tull ye! Fur I loves ye, Sarah Gammon, like the apple o' my eye."

Mrs. Gammon must have started in the act of drinking, for the tea seemed to go the wrong way. As the widow set down her cup and coughed, and Thomas Trudgett patted her on the back, with the

usual exhortations, the face of Absalom Penny, its features contracted into a murderous scowl, appeared over the geraniums and calceolarias on the window-sill. Next moment a gun-barrel was thrust over the flowery hedge, covering the unconscious couple at the tea-table.

VI.

"Cough it up, Sarah," urged the gardener. "It mun be a currant, seemin'ly, or a bit o' candy peel."

"'Twas wut you said!" gasped the widow. "'I loves ye, Sarah Gammon.' Oh, Thomas Trudgett, ye've got it out at last!"

"I'm a slow man but su-er," said the kindled Mr. Trudgett, drawing his chair nearer to the widow's, and enclosing a portion of her waist in a proprietary embrace. "I've bin a comin' this 'ere way for thirty year, an' now I've got there at last!"

"Take another drop o' rum!" cooed Mrs. Gammon tenderly.

"'Tis settled," said the gardener, reaching for the bottle; "Trudgett be your fourth name, as sure as eggs is eggs!"

"You surely means my third?" cried the disappointed widow.

"Your next after Penny," said the gardener. "Dod gass me! wut be that?"

His eyes rounded and his jaw dropped as he

became aware of the levelled gun and the scowling face behind it. He pushed back his chair as though to rise, altered his mind and dived beneath the table. Mrs. Gammon uttered a faint shriek, and faltered :

"Thomas, Thomas, be you gone daft?"

"Noa, 'tis the bye!" said the cowering Trudgett.

A crash of falling flower-pots followed. Absalom Penny, in contempt of the existence of the doorway, was getting in at the window.

"Abey Penny," shrieked Mrs. Gammon, "whatever be you at?"

"Sarah Gammon," announced the desperate young man, "at last I be up to ye!"

"Putt down that theer gun, lad," urged the gardener, from under the table. "It be dangerous, do ye hear?"

"Not arf so dangerous as 'twould a bin," said Absalom, malevolently, "if I'd a 'ad real shot or bullets to load it wi'. But maybe a brace o' brandy balls'll about do your job."

He levelled the weapon, with a murderous glare, and the terrified Trudgett, hastily quitting his sanctuary beneath the table, got behind the widow.

"'Ark to 'im, the wicked young criminal!" he gasped. "Kip in front of I, Sarah, or theer'll be bloodshed!"

"'E must ha' bin drinkin'," said Mrs. Gammon, behind whose solid proportions her menaced suitor cowered.

"I 'ev'nt bin drinkin'," said Absalom, loudly. "Wut I do thirst for be that owd villin's blood."

"Kip i' front of I, Sarah," piped Trudgett, in thin, shaking accents. "Why, wut in the dod-gassed world 'ave I done to ye, Abey bye?"

"Wut was ye doin' just now when I pipped in at winder while back?" demanded Absalom, showing his teeth savagely. "Makin' love to my young woman, as I be to wed o' Wen'sday. Deny it if ye can!"

Miss Susan Wilks, enjoying the drama from an ambush outside the window, clapped her hands at this. Mrs. Gammon, staggering back on the waist-coat of the gardener, ejaculated in genuine alarm:

"My 'eart alive, if the bye bain't jellis!"

"Jellis," echoed Absalom, lowering the gun and regarding the widow with a vengeful expression: "Ay, an' wi' good cause, I reckins. You flirty female, bain't you 'shamed o' yourself? As I'll swing for ye, Sarah Gammon, I tull ye! I'll swing for ye yit, if ye drives me to it!"

"An' me owder than your pore mother!" cried Mrs. Gammon, in astonishment.

"You doan't mean wut you say, Abey!" quavered the terrified gardener, coaxingly.

"I does," asserted Absalom Penny, bumping the gun-butt on the floor, loading with another brandy-ball and ramming the projectile home with a wad of brown paper. "I means to swing for both o' ye!"

"This comes," shrieked the widow, "of givin' ye butcher's meat 'o Sundays. You've bin livin' too 'igh, an' gittin' rumbuckshus. An' sure as my name's Sarah Gammon, nort but dumplin's, an' they patient feariocious foods is wut you'll git, arter to-day."

"You fergits, my gell," said Absalom, sneeringly, "as wut your name'll be Penny an' not Gammon. An' I shall be your lord an' master, an' wut I says I will 'ev, 'ev I will!"

"Then let me tull ye, you impident young varmint," cried the dauntless Mrs. Gammon, "as you'll niver 'ev me!"

"Doan't putt he out!" begged Trudgett from behind. "See 'is finger on the trigger!"

"Say th' word, Missis Gammon!" ordered Absalom. "Tell as you'll gi' me up, an' fare to wed wi' Trudgett!"

"Her can't unless I'll 'ev 'er," interposed the gardener. "An' I woan't!"

"Wut say, Thomas?" exclaimed the scandalised widow.

"Doan't ye interfere 'twixt man an' man," said the gardener distantly. "Abey bye, I wouldn't take 'er away from ye not for nort you could name!"

Absalom Penny lowered the gun, which had begun to make his arms ache, and regarded his elderly rival with a ferocious stare.

"An' wut were ye doin' when I looked in to winder?" he demanded.

"Nort," said the pacific Trudgett, "but tullin' her I'd fare to be her fourth, if ye was to be called afore her, Absalom, son."

He reached his tall white hat from the top of the chest of drawers, and put it on, grabbed his black-thorn stick from the corner by the chimney, and with something between a skip and a slide, reached the front door and pulled it open, to be confronted with the person of Miss Susan Wilks, who had foreseen the strategem.

"Doan't leave I aloan wi' this savage young draggin, Thomas!" entreated Mrs. Gammon.

"Can't interfere wi' lovers quarrels," said Trudgett, basely. "Day-day!"

"Stop as a witness to wut I 'ave to say!" commanded Mrs. Gammon. "Susy, gell, 'old th' door an' doan't let 'im by! Abey Penny," she continued, addressing the uxorious Absalom, "you be as jellis as Wilks an' Gammon together, an' I woan't marry ye, so take an' gi' I up."

"It ain't to be doed, Missis Gammon," said Absalom fiercely. "You be too 'andsome, first an' last."

"Drat the bye!" exclaimed the widow.

"I be in love wi' ye!" said Absalom, languishingly, looking at the home-made cake, of which a goodly wedge remained.

"You'll git over it," said Mrs. Gammon. "Tull 'im so, Susy, theer's a good gel!"

"You'll git over it, Abey," said Susy.

"Ay, you'll git over it!" put in the gardener.

"I shan't, Muster Trudgett," returned the youth, despondently; "I shall take an' blow me brains out, that's what I shall!"

"You woan't git over that, I reckins," said Trudgett, cheerfully. "Still 'tis your affair, not mine, so blow, bye, blow!"

"Back o' barn 'ud be a better place," said the widow, stopping her ears with her apron. "Mind ye doan't mess my clean floor, no more than ye can 'elp!"

"Be that yer last word?" asked Absalom, sternly.

"Gi' my kind love to Wilks an' Gammon an' tell 'em you mid ha' bin my third, but that th' 'rangements was altered," amended Mrs. Gammon.

But Absalom lowered the gun-barrel and sadly wagged his head:

"The magistrates 'quairy an' th' crowner's inkwiss 'll cost ye a mort o' money," he said, despondently. "Look-a-now, you'll hev' to pay th' hire of a pony-trap to Mudleyford."

"It'll be a jaunt for me, Abey," said the matron, consolingly, "an' I can do some shoppin'."

"An' parish'll bury ye. Theer now!" said Trudgett. "Look alive, bye—look alive!"

In contemplation of the obligation to carry out his threat, Absalom Penny became of a ghastly hue. Fortunately the womanly wit of Susan Wilks, spurred by *The Penny Romancer*, came to his aid

at this juncture. Stepping forward, she said, in the imagined accents of the Countess Ermytrude :

"Absalom Penny, I blush for ye! Be a man. Abandon the idear of imbrewing your 'ands in the gore of another. Conker the desprit passion that genaws your vitals. Give this fair girl," she indicated the astonished widow, "to 'im she loves, an' shed upon your path in life the blessin' of two grateful 'earts made one. Or, if a 'uman life must be shed to gratify thy vengeance, let it be mine!" She struck an attitude and concluded :

"Absalom Penny, I will be thy bride!"

"Dod gass it, that be th' thing!" exclaimed Trudgett. Approaching the bewildered Absalom he deftly relieved him of the late Mr. Gammon's gun, and clapped him heavily on the shoulders.

"Take 'er, bye, take 'er!" agreed Mrs. Gammon. "I'll bring over 'er mother, you needn't 'ev no fear o' she!" Why, wut be you makin' faces over now?"

"I wun't 'ev Susy Wilks!" protested Absalom. "Her be main slimmish an' young-like alongside of ye, Missis Gammon. An' I nobbut could wed a gell wi' that red 'air an' those blue eyes wi'out I 'ad Gammon's gun along wi' her."

"I'll gi' ye th' gun," said Mrs. Gammon, reluctantly.

"She'll give you th' gun, Abe," echoed Miss Wilks.

"Then you ha' got th' cottage an' garden," continued Absalom discontentedly, "wi' money in

bank an' rights o' common grazin'. 'Tis a poor kind o' swop, wi'out a bit in hand."

"I'll gi' Susy five good suv'rins," said the aunt, "paid down after th' weddin'. An' I'll gi' ye the licends too, Abey, wut costed I one pound fifteen."

"Wut costed Abe one pound fifteen, you mean, seemin'ly," suggested Susy.

"What costed I——" Absalom was beginning, when the widow interrupted.

"An' I'll throw in Gammon's Sunday trowsies wut I've shartened for ye. An' you can be married in 'em o' Wen'sday all to-same."

"Done wi you then!" said Absalom, slapping his leg and winking at the radiant Susy. "You wouldn't 'ev me, so I've throwed meself away!"

"Well, I 'ope you'll be 'appy!" said Mrs. Gammon, plaintively.

"Buss the gell an' seal the bargain!" bellowed Thomas Trudgett, cheerfully.

"Ay, kiss an' strike han's," Mrs. Gammon bade the couple, who dabbed at each others' faces awkwardly, as she continued to Susy: "Reach me down my Sunday 'at an' cape from top shelf in cupboard, an' go along wi' Abey to th' Vicar's, d'ye hear? Me an' Muster Trudgett be comin' along behind ye." She added, pinning on the hat and taking a venerable green cotton-covered sunshade from its nook in the dresser-corner: "They'll need us to speak for 'em, Thomas, both bein' legal hinfants."

"Dod gass it, Sarah! I bain't none o' their relations," began the gardener, when he met the widow's eye.

"You will be, soon, I reckons," she said, with such determination that Trudgett's legs gave way beneath him and he dropped into the Windsor chair. "Don't tull I ye bain't ready, for your hat be on your headpiece, an' you've got your stick ready i' your hand." She added, rinsing her cup and her guest's and pouring liberally into each something from the green gilt-labelled bottle: "Take a drop more rum before you go, it'll clear your chest for wut you've got to say to Vicar." She raised her cup and smiling fatefully, clinked it against Trudgett's. "Good 'ealth!" she said, and drank.

"Good 'ealth!" grunted Trudgett.

"An' kind love!" said the widow, smiling genially.

"I'll gi' ye a toast like," said the sluggish wooer, after a moment's cogitation: "It bein' settled right an' tight betwixt us as I'm to be yer fourth 'usband, here's to the third, an' may he soon come an' soon go!"

He was about to empty the teacup when the firm hand of the widow arrested him.

"You'll be the next, or nought, I reckins. So come along to Vicar an' put up th' banns."

A moment the second teacup hovered in the air. Then Thomas Trudgett tossed off the dram, smacked his lips, and set the cup down.

"Well, well!" he said, drawing a long breath, "I 'ope I shall be 'appy! Dod gass it, Sarah, I allus knowed you'd git me one o' these days!"

He submitted stolidly as Mrs. Gammon arranged his neckerchief, took him by the ears and imprinted a kiss of proprietorship upon his leathery countenance. Then he got up. The widow tucked his arm beneath hers, and led him towards the door.

THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF AN AUTOMOBILE.

I.

I WAS not a big automobile, you must know—not of the type of those huge, twenty-two horse-power, four-cylindere modern machines, whose dust is that of a battery of artillery at full trot, and which may be heard coming full fifteen minutes before the huge, unwieldy bulk, winking with polished metal and aggressive with glaring enamel, hurtles by. I, who am twenty years old, only fit for the scrap-heap, was made by an English firm, one of the best, to the order of Royalty. I had a twin-cylinder motor of eight horse-power, with an atmospheric-pressure inlet valve—none of your mechanical arrangements that get so easily out of gear. And I had, at the beginning, until the Bishop changed them for pneumatics, solid, thick, rubber tyres. My frame was of light, strong American pine, reinforced by light, strong, steel plates. Brakes of two sorts, each double-acting, one on the countershaft and one on the hub of each driving-wheel. No fear of the stiffest road-gradient with these properly tested. My engine, of the horizontal type, had

ample wearing surface, "calculated for long life," said the square-headed young North-country engineer, who had designed me.

Life—what the life of an engine means, I was to learn on the never-to-be-forgotten day when my tanks were filled, my electric current switched on, and my lubricators began to drip. The young, square-headed man who had made me took his place in the driver's seat. His hand touched my driving-wheel, his foot pressed my centre-pedal, something within me moved; there was a rush of air, a fly-wheel spun, a spark, subtle, fiery, electric, ignited the charge. . . .

The power of motion was mine!

Something beat in me! something lived in me. I was more than a machine, I knew. As I smoothly ran along the asphalté trial-track I was conscious of a voice. It spoke to me in the vibrations of my engine, and something in this way:

"Dear, are you glad to be alive? These clever humans think it is all their doing, but you and I know better. For I am the Spirit Petrolina, a good spirit, too, when I am properly used, as the world is beginning to discover. And from to-day, Automobile, you and I are one. You should be proud, my dear, for you are destined to be the wedding present of a great personage to the greatest beauty of the London season. You have the power of eight in you. You'll see what horses are like when you're taken on your trial-trip to-day, and, if that

goes off well, you will be sent to your new home to-morrow !”

My trial-trip came off, and was eminently satisfactory, and punctually at twelve o'clock upon the morrow I stopped before a certain green door in Chesterfield Square. To my driving-wheel was tied, with a scrap of white silk cord, a square envelope with a very small, very modest, but very imperial crown, stamped in red upon the flap.

“To the Lady Helen Fosvil,” was the direction, and within was a single line of bold, characteristic, masculine handwriting, signifying that the accompanying automobile was a wedding gift to the daughter of an old friend.

“Who is the Lady Helen Fosvil?” I asked the Spirit Petrolina, as I waited in front of the green door. The May sun made the brass upon it twinkle, the Delft window-boxes were full of daffodils, and the balcony above brimmed with azaleas.

“Lady Helen, my dear?” said Petrolina. “She is, as I have told you, the greatest beauty of this London season, this Lady Helen, or Lady Nell, as her friends call her. That is why you are painted white and gold, to match her lovely skin and her glorious hair. As for her eyes, they are a pair of stars, and she has been doing her best to cry them out of her beautiful Greek head lately. Why? Because the hand that is to control her presently isn't the one she wants, or thinks she

wants. She is a romantic little goose, and thinks of nobody but a certain Honourable Captain Yule-Multon, who danced with her at her first ball, my dear; and he cares for the reflection of his handsome sleepy brown eyes and straight nose and silky moustache in the looking-glass more than any woman—even beautiful Nell Fosvil. Here he comes on his park hack, and here *she* comes down the steps. Now watch their eyes. The spark that volts from those brown ones to the blue ones and back again is what humans call Love.”

“Oh—were you going for a spin in the Present?” Captain Yule-Multon said, as the lovely young woman came down the steps. They looked at one another, and the spark, of which Petrolina had spoken, shot from eye to eye.

“Oh, no.” Lady Helen shook her head, biting her lips, not red but pink as the fleshy leaf of a begonia. “It looks inviting—but I believe it would not be the thing to use it until——”

“Until you are married, I suppose,” said the Guardsman, turning his brown eyes full upon the lovely flower-face.

“Until we are married. Exactly.” This was said by a tall, grave gentleman, also in riding-dress, who had stopped his horse, a handsome, spirited creature, several doors higher up, out of respect to me. Now he stood at the bottom of the doorsteps, and looked up at Lady Helen, his rather sad, ash-coloured eyes and thin-lipped mouth, shaded by a

brown moustache, silky, but beginning to turn grey, upon a level with the slim, gloved hand that had been promised him. Hidden under the glove, it wore his betrothal ring, a single great pearl that once had graced the fairer hand of Mary, Queen of Scotland, set in a square of rubies. He was the Duke of Kinneddar and Strongholdness, this grave gentleman of thirty-seven, and Lady Helen and he were to be married in the first week of June.

"It is very gracious; a beautiful gift," the Duke said, in his quiet, grave tones, nodding as my chauffeur, an alert-looking boy, in a quiet but well-known livery, touched his cap to his royal master's friend. "See, Helen, how everything has been thought out and planned for your comfort. You must write a charming letter in your most decipherable scrawl," the ash-coloured eyes had a gleam of fun in them, "in return for this."

"Now the handsome Guardsman gets another look in," murmured Petrolina, "and Lady Nell pales and grows red by turns."

"It would be better for her if his brakes had failed to act upon the steepest down gradient he negotiated in the Regimental Automobile Race last week, and my lady-killing gentleman had come to grief. Instead, I am afraid he will bring somebody else to it. Poor innocent thing, how should you understand, who never left the factory until a day ago! You are a baby, my dear, and an innocent, and

what else is your lovely mistress. Wasn't she brought up at an old castle, in the north of Wales, poor, motherless being, and educated by a kind old governess and the learned old vicar of the parish, in every branch of knowledge except knowledge of the world in which she must live one day. She has a selfish, spendthrift, old dilettante for her father, who has spent all his life upon the Continent, and thinks more of a Louis Quinze cabinet, or a panel painted by Greuze, or a snuff-box enamelled at Limoges, than of his own flesh and blood."

"Is he such a wicked man?" I asked, and Petrolina gave a little sizzle of laughter.

"Here he comes, so judge for yourself;" and a small brougham stopped, a white-haired, elegantly dressed old man, with a beautiful, tired face, got out, and, leaning heavily upon his cane, hurried to meet the Duke. Then I was admired all over again, and everybody went into the house with the green door, except Captain Yule-Multon, who had an appointment to meet a man. And, again, as he took the slender grey-gloved hand of my beautiful mistress in his own, that electric flash passed between the great wistful blue eyes and the bold brown ones.

"Now you think you will hear and see no more, I suppose!" laughed Petrolina. "But you are wrong. Through my power, though I cannot quite explain how, you can witness what you will. I shall rise unseen to that balcony full of azaleas,

enter the pretty chintz drawing-room, that is Lady Helen's own, and——”

In an instant she mounted, and the interior of the pretty room was revealed to me. Three people were there, the grave-looking Duke of Kineddar, Lord Poylet (Lady Helen Fosvil's father), and Lady Helen. Her plumed hat lay upon a table, where were many beautiful things in silver, gold, and enamel; there was a quiver on her lips and a line of anger or of pain between her delicate eyebrows as her father expatiated on the merits of a recently-purchased piece of bric-à-brac, picked up at a sale for a mere song.

“He has always money to spend on things like these, my dear!” whispered Petrolina; “even though his tradespeople and his tailor and his servants are not paid, and poor Lady Nell has to go to the greatest entertainments of the London season in gowns that have been worn three and four, even half a dozen times. If you ever read the Society papers—but how can you read them?—you would notice that the Press goes into raptures over her beauty, but invariably glosses over her gown. And that is anguish, my dear, to a woman who knows that she could wear the latest creation of a master, as well as Jeranne or Henriette Baziet. Who are they? Actresses of Parisian comedy, my child, whom you may meet one day. What is a comedy actress? A charming woman who has studied the art of speaking, moving, and keeping

still—of crying and laughing, until Art has become second nature, and who, above all, has the knack of wearing beautiful clothes as though she had been born in them. But look at Lady Nell. That handsome Captain slipped a note into her hand when he took leave, and she is dying to steal away and kiss and cry over it. She had a scene with her selfish old father last night and begged him to let her off marrying the Duke—who is very much in love with her. And papa told her plainly that his estates were mortgaged to the last acre, and that he has borrowed twenty thousand from a Jew, which must be repaid if she breaks off her engagement to Kinneddar; and that the prospects of her brother, Freddy Fosvil, a pretty boy, who is now at Sandhurst, learning how to be a Cavalry officer, will be ruined for ever if she breaks off this ‘most desirable alliance.’ And the man has eighty thousand pounds’ worth of bric-à-brac which he would not dream of selling, even to save his own flesh and blood from misery. Now he is toddling away to the library, where he has cabinets full of beautiful things. He gives a sharp look at Lady Nell as he gets to the door, which the Duke courteously holds open for him. Ah, my dear, Kinneddar is a *preux chevalier* to be proud of, and if she throws him over for that good-for-nothing, handsome Guardsman, she will be——”

“Oh, hush!” I begged, for Lady Helen was speaking.

"You guess rightly; something troubles me more than I can well express. If your Grace will be kind enough to hear what I have to say——"

"My Grace will not, but Kinneddar is at your service," the Duke said, leaning against the high agate mantelshelf and looking down at the beautiful troubled face, "and will be—always, Helen."

She winced, and the colour faded from her lips.

"I will go straight to the point," she said. "You—have had a wife, and lost her." He bent his head gravely. "Did you love her very dearly? I—I wish to know."

The Duke waited a moment before answering. Then he said:

"I will answer you with perfect candour. I loved my wife Ailsa with my whole soul, with every fibre of my heart. As I believe, unworthy as I was of such devotion, she loved me. And when she died it seemed as though I stood beside the coffin of every woman in the world."

"Ah!" cried Lady Helen, a note of anguish in her voice. "How, having loved her and lost her, can you——" she grew crimson to the roots of her golden hair. "Men are different from women. In your place I could not have endured the idea of a second marriage."

"She wished it," said the Duke, a shade of sternness upon his face. "She had given me no heir in our five years of happiness, and——"

Lady Helen's fair face burned glowing red, and

then the rich colour ebbed away. She rose and met the eyes that looked, coldly, as it seemed to her, into her own.

"Your Grace has taken a weight from my mind, and I thank you," she said, in cold, formal tones that contrasted oddly with her tender girlish beauty. "I was afraid that you looked for love in marrying me. Fortunately, you desire nothing——"

It seemed to me that she was a little wounded.

"Now is his time!" whispered Petrolina. "But he won't use his opportunity—he is a man, and slow-witted. What is he saying, holding both her hands?"

"My Helen, if you are afraid that I have not love to give you, let me assure you——"

She freed her hands with a gentle, but decided effort, as the sound of a gong came from the hall.

"You do not understand. Let me say plainly, that, young as I am, I, like you, have buried my heart's dearest hope. I have stood beside the grave of everything a woman holds most dear. I will be a good wife to your Grace, but I cannot presume to be a loving one. Duty and respect I have to give you, but nothing more."

The Duke's answer rang out clearly.

"I thank you for your candour. Since you do not ask for freedom."

She turned her head away, crushing her white hands together.

"I do not ask it."

The Duke drew himself to his full height. His spare, muscular figure looked soldierly and noble, I thought; his face was set iron-hard, and there was a glint of fire in the ash-coloured eyes.

"Then—I accept the 'duty' and 'respect' that you have offered me. Nor will I ask love of my wife until it is hers to give me."

"When do you marry?" Lady Helen's father asked her that night. She answered very coldly :

"On the third of June."

"And we are to take the happy pair to the Highlands for the honeymoon," said Petrolina, as we turned out of Chesterfield Square, and headed for the stables. "There will be some mountain-climbing for you and me, Automobile, my pet, before we get to the Waesome Bridge, and the Pass of Kilbrandie, and skirt the base of the Cruach, with her double peak, and see Strongholdness Castle, brooding at the edge of the first of the Three Glens. Five hundred miles—and only two stoppages on the road—legitimate ones—if we are lucky!"

The wedding day came! I vibrated with excitement as I stood before the green door in Chesterfield Square. It was open, and the hall was full of lovely flowers, good-looking men, and pretty women—women prettily dressed.

"The handsome Guardsman was at the church, but not at the breakfast," whispered the Spirit Petrolina; "I will tell you what *he* is doing later on. There are the Duke and Duchess, Lady Helen

is the Duchess now, silly. How lovely she looks in that white cloth gown with a toque of Neapolitan violets and chinchilla, and her motor-coat is chinchilla lined with sables—must have cost a fortune. ‘What is everybody biting her for?’ That is kissing, my dear. Everybody kisses a bride, you know, for luck. That white slipper that hit you is for luck, and the rice they are throwing about means the same thing. We shall be off in a minute. The luggage is in behind, with the Duchess’s lady’s maid—the Duke’s valet travels by train, and that is why the lady’s maid looks so glum. Valets and lady’s maids are humans who get their living by keeping richer humans neat and smart: polishing their metal and cleaning their paint—sometimes putting it on. They have an arrangement which enables them to fill their own tanks; and when the batteries need recharging, they send for a person called a medical man. Here come our two people at last. Courage, Automobile. Pedal. Wheel. Whizz—we’re off!”

And we were off.

II.

The new-made Duchess wore a close motor-veil of a glistening, silky texture, through which her fair cheeks glowed like June roses. The Duke pulled down the transparent peak of his cap, and set his lips as he addressed himself to the task of

guiding me through the traffic of the West End. Conscious of responsibility to my smallest nut, I vibrated with nervousness, but the voice of Petrolina recalled me to self-possession.

"Courage, my dear, and buckle down to it. There will be worse to come when we negotiate the Fulham Road, with its double stream of machines all sucked into the great river of traffic that rolls over Putney Bridge, day and night, year by year. But you have a firm hand on your driving-wheel and a sure foot on your pedal—whichever of the three it is necessary to use. The Duke has courtesy, coolness, and nerve, qualifications very necessary to the driver of an automobile. Though he is not young, he is a handsome fellow. Duchess Helen is thinking so . . . I can tell you. . . . Not looking at him! Isn't she? Don't you know that a woman sees most when she seems to see least? He glances at the white-dropped eyelids and long brown lashes under the shining veil every now and then. He notes how the silken gold of her hair sweeps over the pink, shell-like ear, and remembers that all this loveliness is his in the sense of legal ownership only, and that she has nothing to give him but 'duty' and 'respect.'"

"I hope you are comfortable, Helen," was all he said.

"Oh . . . quite," the Duchess answered, with a start.

"I see you are versed in the counsel of perfec-

tion, and refrain from talking to the man at the wheel," Kineddar went on. "But, really, unless a traction-engine is bearing down in front, a butcher's cart trying to pass on the wrong side from behind, and a lady cyclist shooting at me from a side street, I am not easily put out."

The maid in the back seat sniffed.

"I hate that woman!" said Petrolina. "So would you if you knew what she has in her pocket, and so would Kineddar most of all. A letter, my dear, from the other man—the dandy, brown-eyed Guardsman, who was at church, but dodged the breakfast. And the Duchess will find it on her dressing-table when she gets to Rosehall Court (a noble old mansion in Surrey, my dear, a seat of the Duke's, where we are to spend the first week of the honeymoon before going on to the North). And if she finds it, alas for her!" said Petrolina. "And alas, and alas! for Kineddar!"

"But what harm can the letter do?" I asked in trepidation.

"It is a letter written in an hour of madness by a selfish, sensual, hare-brained young man. It tells Duchess Helen that he has gone down before her, and is waiting in the pergola—Rosehall is celebrated for its pergola—for one last word. And if that last word is spoken it will never be the last," sighed Petrolina.

"But—can't you prevent Duchess Helen from getting the letter?" I asked, in alarm.

"Not bad for a young one, upon my word!" said Petrolina, approvingly. "My dear, I am not sure that I can prevent it, but I mean to try. Listen, our bride and bridegroom are getting quite talkative!"

"Look," the Duchess was saying, "what a study for a landscape painter, that old mill with broken sails rising from a strip of marshy pasture, golden with kingcups, bordered with a row of old, old, giant elms."

"And tucked away under the brow of the next hill," said Kineddar, "there is a village of ancient timber-framed cottages, and an inn with a wooden sign carved by Grinling Gibbons, who often used to put up there when travelling between London and Rosehall—where we have much of his best work. I thought we might give you a cup of tea there, unless you would prefer not stopping?"

The young Duchess would have declined the tea, but a discreet cough from Hawkins reminded her that that domestic stood in need of the refreshment.

"And while Hawkins drinks her tea, and I wish it were of the senna brand with all my heart," said Petrolina, "Duchess Helen and Kineddar are going to walk to the Hermit's Chapel. 'Only a few broken coffin-lids and a moss-grown altar-stone within an oblong of stones, on a wind-swept down,' he says, 'but the view is exquisite.' That is, for *her*! *He* thinks the most exquisite view in the world is there, close beside him."

And the newly-wedded Duke and Duchess strolled away together, leaving Hawkins sitting in my back seat in solitary glory. I saw Kineddar make a movement as though he would have offered his wife his arm. But he did not. They turned the corner of the village street, and then the lady's maid, who had been preening and composing her respectable features, and wiping the dust off her shiny face, glanced up at the sound of a soft whistle, and guardedly shook her head. The muslin curtains of a room on the first floor hid the person to whom she signalled.

"Who can it be, hiding up there?" I wondered, as the landlord brought the tea.

"Somebody who has handsome brown eyes and aquiline features, and a waxed moustache, my dear, and beautifully cut tweeds," said Petrolina; "and Hawkins thinks him a demigod, worthy to be enshrined in the *Penny Romancer*. Besides, he pays well, and that woman would do anything for money. Hoity-toity! Here come our wedding couple walking eight feet apart, and looking straight before them. And they were getting on so well. What can have clouded the prospect, I wonder?"

We were off again, flying through the spring-tide landscape, racing the white fleecy clouds driven before the westerly breeze. Quaint hamlets flew by, old Saxon churches nestled under the shadow of prodigious elms, cattle stood knee-deep

in cool streams, golden gorse blazed in mile-long stretches upon the blowy hill-crests, but no word was exchanged between the travellers. The Duke's face was very calm, the Duchess's cold and set. Hawkins, in the back seat, nodded and dozed, for, at the landlord's suggestion, a "little something" had been added to her tea.

"I can't stand this," said Petrolina.

We were bowling easily along a level stretch of road. I felt my speed decrease. The Duke frowned a little. I made redoubled efforts, panted, faltered, and—with a horrible sense of impotence paralysing my driving-wheels—stopped short.

"Hallo!" said Kinneddar, sharply.

"Oh, my lady, your Grace!" cried Hawkins, who had been jerked out of her slumbers by my unpremeditated halt. "Oh!"

"What is wrong?" asked the Duchess, in the clearest, quietest tone, as Kinneddar, who had jumped out, looked up from his investigations.

"Something amiss with the electric current, I am afraid. The car has simply stopped, and in the most solitary and inconvenient part of the road between Wychmer and Rosehall." The Duke busied himself again in my machinery.

"Pop—pop—pop!" I burst out, trembling all over.

"Oh, law! For mercy's sake, your Grace!" shrieked Hawkins, "let me out before the boiler bursts." And as the Duke, restraining a smile,

went round, opened the door, and gravely lifting his cap, offered the alarmed lady's maid the assistance of his hand, she hopped into the road as wildly as an agitated fowl, and sat herself down on a green bank at some distance in the rear to watch for the anticipated violent passage of her employers to another world.

"It is annoying, certainly." The Duchess had regained her ease of manner; there was almost a smile upon her lips. "But at any rate, it is lovely weather for a breakdown."

"If I thought that any trap or vehicle were likely to pass this way," Kineddar rejoined, "I should not mind so much. You could go on with Hawkins to Rosehall."

"While you stayed behind with the car? It would be an odd way of arriving," said the Duchess, "considering——"

"Considering," continued Kineddar, as, blushing, she stopped short, "that you and I were only married this morning?"

The Duchess became absorbed in the landscape. That strange, frozen stiffness had come over her again. When next she spoke, it was in a tone of polite and civil interest.

"You are making yourself very tired and very hot, I am afraid?"

"The long and the short of it is that I am a self-reliant idiot," said Kineddar. "I ought to have brought the chauffeur. But I thought he would

be a nuisance, or that you would prefer your maid——”

The too-toot of a motor-horn broke the silence. Round the long slanting curve of the road dashed a machine, driven at the maddest pace conceivable. The Duke closed the bonnet of my engine just in time. . . . A gust of wind, a cyclone of grit and small stones, and the car passed like a projectile, and vanished in the distance, unheeding Kineddar's hail.

“The fellow drives like a madman,” said Kineddar. “I wonder who he was? Impossible to recognise anyone in those black wire goggles. If he had had the decency to stop, one might have—Helen, I am afraid you are tired. You are certainly very pale.”

“I—I thought I recognised the—car,” she said, hurriedly. Hawkins, reposing on the edge of the ditch a quarter of a mile behind, had done more. . . . She had recognised the driver. But Kineddar uttered an exclamation of relief.

“Good! . . . I have it! The oil doesn't flow into the cylinder, the pipe must be stopped up with something.”

He worked energetically for a moment or two.

“No—it's clear,” he said, despondently. “And night is drawing in, and you are tired and hungry.”

“Do you hear anything coming?”

The Duchess held up her hand. “Wheels!”

It was a butcher's cart. The driver, a greasy, grinning youth, pulled up as Kineddar signalled.

"'Ad a broik-down, hee—hee?"

"Not quite," said the Duke, as I trembled with indignation. "We'll call it a stoppage. Were you going anywhere near Rosehall?"

"Wi'in six moile."

"Will you oblige me by taking a message to the house?"

"Noa!" said the butcher, and jerked the reins. The old white horse jogged on, and out of sight; the Duke and Duchess burst out laughing.

"Fate means us to stay here," said Kineddar, and with an apology, pulled off his coat and vanished, this time underneath me. The shadows lengthened steadily. A white owl flew across the road, vanishing in the gloom of the wood that fringed it; the setting sun reddened the west.

"Any other woman would have grumbled," thought Kineddar, looking up at his wife's pure, quiet profile, as she sat, her hands clasped upon her knees, gazing into the sunset. He gathered himself up and knelt upon the step. As she sat and dreamed, so he knelt and dreamed—and longed—for something sweeter than that promised duty and respect. . . . A little breeze blew a fold of her long light silk veil across his lips. . . . He kissed it—and she saw him, and blushed as crimson as the glowing west.

"I—beg your pardon!" he said.

"Oh—why? I did not——" she was beginning, when he stopped her with a shout.

"I have it. Hurrah, Helen! Airbound!"

"I whispered that in his ear, my dear," said Petrolina.

"I am afraid I am dreadfully stupid, but what is 'airbound'?" asked Duchess Helen.

"Lend me a hairpin, my dear, and you will see." His tone was boyishly, oddly triumphant. And it was the first time he had ever called her "*my dear*." She pulled off her gloves and put her white hands up to the wealth of coils that crowned her. But the hands were unsteady.

"Absurd . . . I can't . . . please take one!" she said, biting her lip. "Never mind your hands."

Her bosom heaved at his touch—the touch of the husband with whom she was to live on terms of duty and respect. Against his sternest principles Kineddar brushed her perfumed hair with his lips, as he gingerly lifted the veil and stole the required implement.

"Hurrah!" he cried, a moment later, then resumed the driver's seat.

"What was wrong, after all?" asked Duchess Helen, as I moved smoothly on.

"The air vent was stopped with a piece of grit. I cleared the hole with a prod of your hairpin, and——"

The Duke increased the speed, I answered to the call. Trees and hedges went smoothly by; the red-gold sky rolled up to meet us. Bats swooped by

in the twilight, and robins, equally intent on hawking midges; the perfume of the hawthorn, the wild-cherry blossom, and the gorse was combined with the scent of primroses and blue hyacinths in one heavy, delicious extract of Spring. The two people on the front seat inhaled it with swimming senses, their hearts beat, they leaned towards one another, as though invisible bonds drew them. They spoke little, but each was keenly conscious of the other's presence, and so the miles spun happily from my wheels. The sunset had faded to deep apricot, a pale-tinted moon hung in a sea of translucent green as Rosehall showed across a sunk wall of mellow old brick and a rich foreground of meadows, fragrant with innumerable cowslips, girt with orchards in the bridal robes of May. Every one of the mullioned windows of the ancient Tudor house shone welcome, the hall-door showed a square of mellow fire and candle-light, the lodge-gates stood open, with villagers about them; a shout went up as I dashed into the wide avenue, coursed between ranks of antique, over-shadowing chestnuts, and stopped before the great south front that daylight was to show one mass of climbing roses. Before the expectant servants could hurry down the steps, the Duke sprang to the ground and extended his hand.

"Welcome to my wife!" was all he said; but his voice trembled in saying it, and their hands were unsteady when they met. The Duchess

stumbled in her furs on alighting, so that for one instant her husband supported her upon his heart. Then they passed in another between ranks of bowing servants, and even as she gave the ancient housekeeper her hand, the Duchess did not remember what had been left behind upon the road.

"Her Grace is tired—she will go to her rooms, and dinner can be served in half an hour," the Duke said, and Duchess Helen was guided to the exquisite suite that had belonged to the ladies of Rosehall for centuries past.

"And that's how it ended," Petrolina told me afterwards. "She had hardly glanced at the carved oak fireplace, tapestried walls, and diapered rafters, hardly noted the roses heaping the bowls and vases of ancient Oriental ware, or appreciated the mixture of modern luxury and old-world elegance that appealed so subtly to the sense of beauty and the sense of comfort, when, in answer to the housekeeper's interrogation—

"And her Grace's maid?" the Duchess gave no answer except an exclamation of dismay. "Kinneddar! Philip! we have forgotten Hawkins—we have left her sitting by the road. What can have become of her?—she must be sent for immediately—how could I be so inconsiderate—so unkind?"

A moment later she was in the gallery, panelled with polished oak, and shining trophies of arms. The Duke stood at a window, his back to her, his

head bent—not looking at the deer couching in the bracken under the great oaks of the park, or at the last flag of day streaming in the west, but at some small object lying in his open palm. As the Duchess noiselessly approached him from behind, he bent his head and kissed the thing he cherished. She saw that it was her hairpin, and her heart swelled to bursting with repentance and newly-awakened love. “So good, so generous, so kind, so noble!” were the epithets she mentally applied to her husband. “And he loves me—he loves me,” she added, mentally. He swam before her tear-filled eyes, and when he turned he saw the tears in them, and held out his arms. “They were only empty for three seconds,” said Petrolina, “I am glad to say.”

“And Hawkins?” I asked.

“They have sent a dog-cart for Hawkins—with apologies and warm wraps. To-morrow, when the Duchess finds that letter on her dressing-table, she will be dismissed,” said the Spirit, with a little triumphant giggle. “As for the man who wrote it, he will wait in the pergola until he feels it is no use waiting any longer. Then he will sneak away, take his car back to London, and probably marry the brewer’s widow. Thus, you see, how great ends are brought about by little things. By simply letting a bit of grit get into your air-valve, I have brought about a happy understanding between two people, who might, but for that delay upon the

road, have been parted and unhappy for ever after. To say nothing of getting Hawkins left in a dry ditch. I rather plume myself upon that," said Petrolina.

"And that was the end of my first adventure," said the Automobile.

III.

From the Duchess of Kinneddar and Strongholdness, I passed, by gift, into the hands of a dignitary of the Established Faith—no less a personage than the Bishop of Baverfield, a Broad and Low Church divine, who, nephew himself of a baron by the female side, had married an aunt of her Grace. The Right Reverend Ebenezer Grubble, D.D., was not a fatally opulent Bishop; the see was small, the official income appertaining but £3,000, and his family, consisting principally of daughters, would have done honour to a country curate on a stipend of sixty pounds.

"Therefore," said Mrs. Grubble, standing over me in the converted coach-house at Baverfield Place, "I am obliged to Helen. She took my hint gracefully, that I will say, when I told her of the number of claims upon you, and the expense to which you will be put over this pastoral visitation. Now, at any rate, we shall be saved carriage-hire and train fares; and who shall condemn the automobile in future, seeing that it will have received, in a way of speaking, the sanction of the Church?"

"But, my dear," said the Bishop mildly, "I do not know how to drive an automobile."

"Then, Ebenezer, you must learn," said the Bishop's wife.

She was a large woman, and Dr. Grubble, after one rebellious glance, gave in. "Very well, my dear," he said meekly. "I suppose a competent instructor can be easily obtained. . . . It is a pity that Stobax is no longer with us. He was, as doubtless you know, an accomplished chauffeur."

Mrs. Grubble's brow darkened as the Bishop breathed the tabooed name of a once-trusted domestic chaplain and secretary, who had basely betrayed the Bishop's confidence by falling in love with his eldest daughter, Gertrude, and inducing that high-spirited and stubborn girl to reciprocate his passion. When the crash came Gertrude had been hastily despatched to an aunt at Scarborough, and the Rev. Stobax had been relegated to a living in the diocese. The rectory of St. Gronwold's was a charming house, the income five hundred a year, the grey square-towered Anglo-Norman church, a gem of its kind, equally interesting to antiquary or artist. The Rev. Ransom Stobax had not come off so badly. But he had had reason to expect a residential canonry and chancellorship combined, which would have brought in at least eight hundred per annum, and he had confidently looked forward to a future day when his wife should admire him in a dean's shovel-hat and gaiters. Therefore, when

indued with the rectory of St. Gronwold's, Mr. Stobax no longer restrained those High Church tendencies which, allowed to develop under the shadow of the square Anglo-Norman tower, had made him a thorn in the side of the Bishop, and the Bishop's wife, for the last twelvemonth.

"That man!" Mrs. Grubble moaned—"that man!"

The Bishop, whose paternal relation to Nonconformity was not the smallest jewel in his mitre, looked pained. He had that morning received an address of expostulation from the Protestant Coalition urging him to take steps to purge the diocese of the "spreading gangrene" of Anglicanism, and indicating as the first necessary step the suspension of the Rector of St. Gronwold's.

"That man who has betrayed and defied you! That man who preaches in a 'cassock' and celebrates in a 'cope'—who advocates the use of flowers and incense—who has instituted a confessional in the vestry, and compels the choir to walk in procession before him round the church on Sunday evenings, singing! Horrible!"

"I know it, I know it!" said the Bishop. "Painful, most painful, when one reflects that Stobax spent four years under our roof, and may reasonably be supposed to have imbibed his opinions from our teaching." The Bishop meditated.

"He must be made an example of," said Mrs. Grubble, forcibly. "And he shall be. Gertrude

returns to-morrow from Scarborough. Your sister informs me that she appears repentant and subdued—quite reformed, in fact.”

“Let us hope that she is!” said the Bishop, wearily. Gertrude had her mother’s spirit; and Dr. Grubble had small faith in the permanency of the transformation. In thirty years he had never once been able to subdue Mrs. Grubble.

She had her way now as ever, that indomitable woman, and the Bishop took lessons in automobile management. He was a timid driver; but a bishop on a pastoral visitation does not require to travel at the rate of forty miles an hour, and the diocese was a small one. He caused a local agent to overhaul me, and, greatly to the disgust of the Spirit Petrolina, I was sent to a firm of motor manufacturers for improvements and repairs.

“Which you don’t require, my dear!” said Petrolina. “A new coat of paint and varnish, a thorough overhauling—well and good! But pneumatic tyres are a mistake where you are concerned, and will bring their own troubles—to say nothing of the bill the Bishop will have to pay.”

The Bishop did indeed groan as he got out his cheque-book; but upon his wife representing that no further expenditure would be involved, he signed his name with very fair grace. Upon a fair day in early September the party left the Palace, the Bishop in the driving-seat, Mrs. Grubble enthroned beside him, his chaplain-secretary and the once rebellious

Gertrude, with the luggage, in the back seat. The chauffeur, with whose presence the Bishop was unwilling to dispense, was in attendance on a motor-bicycle. The Bishop would have preferred him closer at hand, in case of need.

"But neither Gertrude nor Mr. Piggelle can ride a motor-cycle," said Mrs. Grubble, forcibly, upon the Bishop's giving utterance to the preference indicated above. "And supposing either of them could, it would be unfitting that they should do so. As for me, I do not and cannot suppose that you would wish me to make a public exhibition of myself."

"No, my dear—no!" The hastily-conjured-up mental image of Mrs. Grubble on a motor-bicycle made the Bishop's hand shake as he grasped the driving-wheel. "Are we quite ready?" he asked, nervously.

"In a moment," said Mrs. Grubble, and gave the signal for which the local photographer, with his attendant young man, had anxiously been waiting. The shutter snapped, the Chaplain sneezed, the party had been taken, and I moved upon my way.

"How unfortunate, Mr. Piggelle!" said the Bishop's wife over her shoulder, referring to the Chaplain's unlucky sternutation. And, indeed, in the negative the reverend gentleman made a most unfortunate appearance, portions of his head being represented as flying all over the place. Piggelle

mumbled apologies, his face as scarlet as his hair, Gertrude laughed mischievously, and I glided smoothly down the avenue and out at the lodge gates, where the keeper's wife dropped a reverent double-barrelled curtsey in response to the Bishop's smile and his wife's nod.

"Mrs. Grubble feels at peace with all the world, except one Anglican parson," whispered Petrolina. "How well she would look in a mitre with an episcopal staff, wouldn't she? Her bonnet is the shape of the one, and her umbrella-handle suggests the other. In that tin bonnet-box which she has tied on to the back of Thompson's bicycle she has an evening dress bodice with lawn sleeves which really were a pair of the Bishop's. I believe she would think it quite natural to hold a Confirmation or to sit in her husband's place in the Upper House. Such an embodiment of arrogance as that woman should be taken down, and shall, mark my words, my dear! For how can a Bishop look after the souls of other people when his wife won't let him call his his own?"

With which pithy remark the fairy subsided into silence, and I pursued my way through my right reverend driver's diocese on the new pneumatic tyres, the substitution of which for the solid had given Petrolina such vexation. The visitation was to occupy the space of a fortnight, and for the next week the Bishop found plenty to do. He took the chair at clerical meetings, he inspected churches,

almshouses, and schools, he ordained one curate, suspended another (overcome by cowslip wine administered by a too hospitable farmer's wife upon a day of excessive dryness), consecrated a newly-built sacred edifice, and preached in it afterwards. And wherever he went, aided and abetted by Mrs. Grubble, he kept a sharp look-out to detect and extirpate what he had termed in a powerful pamphlet, "the poisonous weed of Anglicanism."

"It may be said, my lord, to flourish only on the borders of your diocese," said the Rural Dean. St. Gronwold's was clearly meant, and the Bishop, reposing in an easy-chair at the Deanery after a long and arduous day, folded his well-kept hands upon his apron and shook his head slightly, as he raised his glass of rare old port to his appreciative lips. The Dean, the Bishop and his secretary were sole occupants of the Deanery dining-room, its table strewn with relics of an excellent dessert. The Dean, a lean, angular, white-haired old man, with a spiritual, ascetic face, peeled hothouse peaches with scientific care—the Bishop was fond of peaches. The Secretary, with the regularity of a machine, cracked new filberts—the Bishop loved filberts—disposing the succulent kernels in neatly-drilled rows upon the satin damask table-cloth at his Lordship's left hand. From the drawing-room came the sound of Mrs. Grubble's eloquence, softened by distance, as she harangued the Dean's wife and daughters on the subject of Evangelism in the servants' hall.

“One more—only one more, my dear Dean, or I shall suffer for your hospitality, I fear. Piggelle—I entreat you!” the Bishop said. He accepted a Havana, and his scruples on the subject of a liqueur were gradually overcome.

“Genuine Chartreuse,” said the Dean, playfully. “At Stobax’s convent—the Sisterhood—new black currant wine, I understand.”

The Bishop turned circular eyes upon the speaker.

“Stobax’s——?”

“Havn’t you heard the latest?”

“I have heard of Popish practices, of Ritualistic exercises which caused me the deepest sorrow. Candles and Compline, genuflections and flowers, vestments and incense—quite sufficient.”

“Nothing of an Anglican community of nuns, the Sixty Sisters of the Scapular, settled in the vicinity of St. Gronwold’s within the last few months? They have taken a fine old house—very good grounds and gardens—within a mile of the rectory; and Stobax—unless I am misinformed—officiates as chaplain, and, I suppose, spiritual director.”

“Merciful powers! And that man was nourished in my——”—the Bishop about to say “bosom,” changed it for “house”—“for years! He even aspired to become a member of my family. From what has my child been saved! Chaplain to an Anglican sisterhood—can anything more deplorable, more mournful, be conceived! But I will

extirpate this cancerous spot." The Bishop clenched his soft, plump fist and smote the table carefully. "I will nullify—sterilise—abolish this crying evil! I will——"

"You can suspend Stobax, I believe, if he prove obstinate," said the Dean, with a twinkle; "but then he can appeal . . . to three superior tribunals, as we know, in the Court of Arches, the Chancery, and the Privy Council. English law protects the inferior clergy very effectually from any—ahem!—excess of zeal on the part of their spiritual superiors. As regards the Sisterhood, I do not see what steps can be taken."

"I must reflect—I must ponder—upon what is best to be done," said the agitated Bishop. "Say nothing to Mrs. Grubble, I beseech you, my dear Dean; it would ruin her night's rest."

The Dean promised, but the treacherous Piggelle blabbed, and the Bishop owned to a headache when we started in the morning.

"And Gertrude has red eyes," said Petrolina. "That woman has been nagging the girl to desperation. She is fond of the Reverend Ransom Stobax, and Stobax is a good fellow and loves her, and if she marries him will make her a happy wife. And marry him she shall, if I can bring it about; so look out for squalls, my dear."

Her tone made me vaguely nervous. But I had been well oiled and capitally cleaned, and the Bishop drove—figuratively—"to the cemetery." A more de-

pressingly careful steersman than the good prelate never guided an automobile. Yet I fancied I had a pain, a slight pricking sensation in the mechanism controlling my right-hand guiding-wheel.

"Nonsense!" said Petrolina, to whom I mentioned this. "It's in your back tyres, that take all the driving strain, you ought to feel it—if you feel anything at all. You slept like a top last night in the Deanery coach-house, while I roamed about the house. To ascend to the windows of a second-floor spare bedroom is not much to a spirit who has guided an airship. . . . Gertrude's light burned late—she had a letter of eight pages to read, and read it several times. From the Reverend Ransom Stobax, and very well guessed. He knew, he said, that there was no ordinary hope of a reasonable reconciliation between a clergyman who avows himself an Anglican, and a bishop who calls Anglicans Ritualists. He was quite aware that steps would be taken to deprive him, if possible, of his rectory. He trusted that even if he lost that he might not lose his love as well—unless Gertrude feared to be the wife of a poor man, in which case he would feel it his duty to release her. I like that young man, though he was a chaplain and put up with Mrs. Grubble's imperious airs for the sake of her daughter's pretty face. It is time that she-bishop, that feminine prelate, self-constituted vicarress of souls in Blankshire, was taken down a peg. I have made up my mind to do it, and I think I see how it

can be done. We are now in Stobax's parish, about a mile from St. Gronwold's. Pretty landscape, isn't it? The rectory kitchen and church date from 1123. Norman fonts, Anglo-Saxon stones and sundial, effigies of ecclesiastics and warriors. But what do you care for antiquities? Though this high wall on our left-hand encloses an interesting old park, and the old stone gatehouse we're about to pass leads to a remarkably well-preserved example of an ancient English manor-house, you really——"

Just as we passed the gatehouse the road dipped in a steep down-gradient. Suddenly—I know not why—I violently swerved. The Bishop was shot from his seat, landing elastically on his back in the middle of the dusty highway. Cutting a deep curved furrow in the hedgerow bank, I righted by a miracle, and continued my race unguided, freighted with three passengers who were ignorant of the uses of the brake.

"Help! — oh, mercy, help!" groaned the Bishop's lady. But the chauffeur, ordered to ride a quarter of a mile ahead, because of the dust, was out of sight and hearing. Piggelle cowered in the bottom of my car. Gertrude said no more, but her terrified eyes, rolling backwards to the scene of the catastrophe, recognised a familiar figure—the figure, in fact, of a youngish clergyman on a bicycle, riding frantically in pursuit, shouting, "Put on the brakes, for Heaven's sake! The left pedal—the left pedal!"

The familiar, much-loved voice of the Reverend Ransom Stobax stimulated the brain and urged the muscles of the frightened girl to instant, decisive action. She clambered over into the front seat, using the grovelling chaplain as a stepping-block, and did as her lover bade. I stopped so suddenly as to dash the nose of Mr. Piggelle against the back of the front seat. The chaplain bled, the ladies wept. Ransom Stobax coming up, very hot, was hailed as a deliverer. . . . Gertrude's eyes spoke volumes.

Mrs. Grubbe grasped him by the coat-sleeve as she cried: "My husband? Tell me the worst—at once!"

"The porter and his wife are attending to the Bishop," said the Reverend Ransom Stobax. "He is, I trust, not seriously injured. Let us drive back and ascertain."

Scrapes and abrasions made up the sum of the Bishop's injuries. They were treated by the local medical man, who fortuitously drove by in his dog-cart.

"A severe shaking," he said, as the Bishop 'ugh'ed and ah'ed. "Arnica and lint, a composing draught, and three days in bed are what I should recommend."

"Precautions which I cannot but feel necessary," said the Bishop. He extended three fingers to the Reverend Ransom Stobax as he thanked him for his timely aid. One cannot embrace a deliverer in

an inferior whom one means to suspend. "Under more fortuitous circumstances, Mr. Stobax, I should have asked you to extend to me, to Mrs. Grubble, and my daughter, the hospitality of the Rectory roof. Things being as—regrettably—they are, I may only solicit you to recommend me to the most respectable inn the neighbourhood affords."

"There is not an inn within ten miles," said Stobax, very stiff and erect.

"Then what are we to do?" said the Bishop. "What in mercy are we to do? My pains increase—my bones stiffen—I can with difficulty rise from my chair." He groaned, and the doctor turned twinkling eyes from his Lordship to the Reverend Ransom Stobax, and rubbed his chin, saying :

"They take boarders here, and the rooms are uncommonly comfortable—the cooking quite capital in its way."

"Why not——" began Mrs. Grubble, but the porter's wife shook her head.

"Only lady-boarders," she said.

The Bishop groaned. Mrs. Grubble turned indignantly upon the porter's wife.

"Do you understand, my good woman, that this suffering gentleman is the Bishop of Baverfield?"

The porter's wife blushed and curtsied, but held firm. Mrs. Grubble was scathing in her indignation. Merciful powers ! Was not a Bishop—*her* Bishop—equal to a dozen lady-boarders? If you cannot admit a Bishop to a dove-cote of lady-boarders,

whom can you admit, in the twin names of Propriety and Virtue?

Then, with a queer look at the Bishop, the Reverend Ransom Stobax made a suggestion.

"I would advise Mrs. Grubble, in the present emergency, to apply to the Superior—I would say—to send a message, explaining the situation—to the lady of the house."

"I will write it on my card—no, on the Bishop's card," said Mrs. Grubble.

The card was sent by the porter's wife to the lady of the house. The lady of the house sent back a verbal message intimating that the august invalid and his family and his chaplain were welcome. Accommodation could also be extended to their vehicle, the chauffeur alone was left roofless. The Rector of St. Gronwold's told the mechanic of an address in the village where he might obtain a furnished attic, and with a comprehensive bow, and a rapid interchange of eyes with Gertrude, took leave.

"It is so odd," said Gertrude, meeting him accidentally next morning about half a mile down the road, "but we haven't yet seen the landlady of our boarding-house. We have a suite of cool, comfortable rooms overlooking the courtyard, the beds are extremely clean, and the cooking excellent. Papa is ever so much easier, but Mamma is miserable. We are not allowed to walk in the gardens at the back of the house, we are waited upon by the porter's wife,

and mamma feels, she says, that there is some mystery. You know how determined she is. Well, she has made up her mind to probe things to the bottom, and she will."

Mrs. Grubble kept her word. When, ghastly pale, and almost incapable of speech, she tottered into the Bishop's apartment, upon the morning of the third day, the mystery was a mystery no longer.

"Ebenezer!—Husband!—Bishop!" she cried, "I have terrible news to break!"

"Dear me!—my dear," said the Bishop, sipping at a bowl of nourishing chicken broth. But, figuratively, Mrs. Grubble dashed it from the good man's lips.

"We are not—I have discovered all—we are not in a boarding-house," groaned she. "We are IN A CONVENT!"

"Mamma, you have been spying!" said Gertrude, as the Bishop, pale and horror-stricken, tottered to his feet.

"I concealed myself at a window in a back passage, from whence a view of the gardens could be obtained," groaned Mrs. Grubble. "They were taking exercise there—a dozen of them—not lady-boarders, but NUNS! Protestant nuns—Anglican sisters—the community of which that wretched, wicked Mr. Stobax is the father and the protector. The plot is now laid bare, Bishop—you are the victim of a conspiracy. In plain words, you have been trapped!"

"I will not listen to such an accusation!" burst out Gertrude. "Papa, be just. What had Mr. Stobax to do with the accident to our automobile? Nothing! It was mamma who forced herself in here, uninvited. If you are in a mess, it is she who has got you into it."

"Undutiful, impertinent girl!" screamed the Bishop's wife. The Bishop, very pale and flabby, stared into vacancy. He saw, he read, with prophetic eye, the scathing paragraphs in the Low Church papers, the approving utterances in the High Church ones.

"The Bishop of Baverfield," he murmured, "has just returned from a pastoral visitation throughout his diocese. The Convent of the Sixty Sisters of the Scapular, situated within a mile of the Rectory of St. Gronwold's, enjoyed the privilege of affording hospitality to his Lordship."

But the Bishop was a gentleman. When his wife called upon him to shake the dust from his consecrated feet and quit the convent that instant, he said: "With infinite relief, my dear, when I have thanked the Superior for her kindly hospitality, and discharged my pecuniary liabilities to the establishment."

"They will take nothing—they have refused the bank-note I offered—almost rudely," screamed Mrs. Grubble.

"I fear, my dear, it was rudely tendered," said the Bishop, with firmness. "Gertrude, my dear,

your arm. I will seek out our—arah—hostess myself, and ——”

He quitted the room on his daughter's arm.

“There is only one thing to be done,” said Mrs. Grubble. “This must be hushed up. Mr. Stobax must be sent for—confided in—conciliated, and—— Yes, there is nothing else for it, he must marry Gertrude, even if it breaks my heart !”

“Well, my dear, didn't I tell you I intended to put things right for our friend the Reverend Ransom Stobax ?” jeered Petrolina, as we started on the homeward journey, the Bishop and the chauffeur in front, the happy lovers smiling in the back seats. “Old Mother Grubble has gone back by train with the red-headed Piggelle. He has a little surprise for her—a declaration of love for her second daughter, and a request for the residential canonry with the vacant chancellorship. And he will get the canonry—and the chancellorship—or peach. It is odd, my dear, how in this world the ugliest and biggest mouths catch all the plums that tumble when somebody else has shaken the tree !”

IV.

The Bishop of Baverfield never made another pastoral visitation by means of me. As I had originally been a loan, and not a gift, I was returned to the Duchess of Kineddar, who lent me to her brother, a newly-fledged sub-lieutenant of Hussars,

who would by and by succeed to the paternal title with the paternal embarrassments. It was in the early spring of the year that crowned the Yule-Multon divorce case with a decree *nisi* for the complainant, a stout, easily-weeping lady, who had been very badly used by the respondent, the handsome Guardsman, whose letter, in my first adventure, was too late in reaching the mark at which it was addressed. He had got through a great deal of the poor lady's money, she being the widow of a wealthy brewer, who, as Petrolina explained, had made a great many people bad because he sold such good beer. And when the Hon. Mrs. Yule-Multon got her decree and resumed her discarded name of Topping, the Captain was obliged, after sending in his papers, to betake himself abroad, and there he met Freddy—who had no right to be there—ruffling it in company of gamesters, millionaires, Grand Dukes, and Presidents of foreign Republics—to say nothing of the ladies who accompanied them.

They encountered at the Casino, in brilliant Easter weather, three o'clock noon. The first glimpse of Freddy's fair face, illuminated by a pair of frank blue eyes, and adorned with delicately-pencilled eyebrows and golden moustache, turned Yule-Multon sick with recollection. He was so like Duchess Helen. The boy's tailor had, in a trustful spirit which did honour to the tradesman's heart, if not his head, furnished him with garments of the latest Bond Street cut. His hat was a poem,

his waistcoat a dream. His necktie—of sober tints, as befitting “One of Ours”—was tied in the newest knot. As he swaggered along smiling, in the best humour with himself and all the world, fashionable *cocottes* cried: “What a darling! *C’est chic, ma foi!*” Great ladies looked approval, and the Duchesse de Camelot, who is nothing if not ethical, moaned aloud that one so young and beautiful should come to the Casino.

“Hallo, Fosvil! Where are you bound?” was the Guardsman’s greeting.

“*Trente-et-quarante*,” said Freddy, rattling in his pocket sovereigns which were the last meltings of Duchess Helen’s birthday cheque.

“Hang *trente-et-quarante!* Come and have a flutter at the roulette-table,” said Yule-Multon.

He took Freddy’s arm, and the boy, who had always thought him a fine fellow, laughed and went with him.

“*Vous etes* a dummy—*n’est ce pas?*—only pretendin’ to play?” said Freddy to an old lady with a hooked nose. “I’ll give you five francs for your seat,” and he handed them over to Madame de Punter, and got effusive thanks—and the chair.

He changed a thousand-franc note for ten *plaques*, and put four of them on *impair*, laughing and chatting with Yule-Multon. Then he threw three pieces on *pair*, and won again.

“In vein, by Jove!” he cried, and Captain Yule-Multon, glancing darkly at the fair, triumphant face

and shining blue eyes, decided, with other people, that it was true. He followed Freddy's game closely for the next twenty *coups*, and excitement gathered and increased round the two Englishmen.

A double pile of gold rose before them, and calmly, methodically, as it seemed, they continued to stake and win. Then *zero* came up, and the stakes upon the board were put in prison—the next *coup* liberated them, and—

“The run of luck is at an end,” whispered Yule-Multon. “We have won ten thousand francs between us. Let us change it into notes and sovereigns, and get out of this.”

And, this done, he steered young Fortunatus through the crowd, greedy and curious, out into the open air.

“My hat!” cried Freddy. “Why did you bring me out of the scrimmage? Why, we might have broken the bank between us!” His pockets were bulging with notes and gold, as were those of his companion.

“You ungrateful young beggar!” Yule-Multon said. “Thank me that you have got away with a very pretty nest-egg.”

“I won it with Nelly's money,” chuckled jubilant Freddy. “I must buy her a present out of it. Where are you staying, old fellow?”

“At the Couronne.” Then, as Freddy's eyes opened rather more widely, Yule-Multon added stiffly: “It's not up to first-class form, I'm aware,

but it's near the Casino—and one can turn day into night—supposing one wants to.”

“The best of all ways to lengthen our days
Is to steal a few hours from the night ”

trolled Freddy. “Look here, will you dine with me at the Metropole?”

“Thanks, but why not come back with me to the Couronne? The cooking's capital, and the wine is something like. And——”

“Righto!” said Freddy. “D'you know, I've often wondered what it felt like to be a millionaire. Well, I know now, and it's rippin'! Here's my car waiting. You know it—used to be Nell's once upon a time. I meant to drive over to Roquebrune to call on some friends, but they'll keep.”

“My dear, I am afraid for the boy,” sighed Petrolina, as we stopped before the white-painted, green-blinded hotel, in a narrow by-street. “He is in bad company. Our handsome ex-Guardsman is a scoundrel, and has a score to pay off somebody who loves handsome, hare-brained Freddy as the apple of her eye. Listen. Yule-Multon is proposing a quiet game of poker before dinner. Not bridge, you see, because he means it to be a *tête-à-tête*. . . . He has a golden goose to pluck, and doesn't mean that any of his rascally friends—and he is as much a rascal as the worst of them—to share in the plunder. Now they are going up to Yule-Multon's room—he has only one, funds being low. Presently, when the *table d'hôte* bell rings, these two will be

too much absorbed to dine; they will stay up there behind those queer jealousies and order drinks instead."

It turned out exactly as Petrolina had prophesied. The gong sounded, and the tables filled with men and women of all nationalities, but the handsome ex-Guardsman, with the sleepy, fierce, brown eyes, and the silky caressing manner, and the beautiful English boy were not of those who dined. They sat on either side of a little round-topped, green cloth-covered table in Yule-Multon's room, a bottle of cognac and some syphons of seltzer, a bowl of cracked ice, and a decanter of absinthe upon a stand close by. Yule-Multon splashed soda into his glass, and only made feint with the brandy, but Freddy, flushed and losing heavily, had frequent recourse to the bottle.

"You have Old Harry's own luck," the boy said, with a nervous laugh, as Yule-Multon displayed a royal flush against two pairs of Freddy's.

"Why does he always win?" I asked.

"Look at the little finger-nail of his right hand, and you will know why. It is of uncommon length, is it not? And, just before dealing, he covers the pack with his right hand, doesn't he? There is a tiny pin-prick just within the edge of certain valuable cards, and that cultivated little finger-nail, gently inserted between them, ascertains exactly where they lie. Then, when just about to deal, he holds the pack in both hands, clever fellow that he

is. Only for a moment, but—to a skilled manipulator like our friend—that moment is sufficient. Result : Freddy gets a bad hand, his alert companion a full one. Already the boy has lost four thousand francs of his winnings—his handsome face is cloudy and flushed, his throat is parched. He goes in for brandy and soda once more, and bets heavily on the cards he holds. Three kings, not at all bad. But Yule-Multon has something better—nothing less than a royal flush—and Freddy pushes over all the cash he has left, and with a harsh laugh takes his diamond and pearl pin from his necktie, and loosens his watch and chain, and lays them down on the table. What is he saying?

“No I O U’s while I have money’s worth. Nothing but my studs left now, to gamble with, and Nell gave ’em me, Multon, and I don’t care about riskin’ em.”

He did risk and lost.

“I’ll take your paper for the balance,” Yule-Multon said, pulling his heavy moustache, and smiling in the flushed face of his victim.

“I promised Nell,” the boy began, and the other grinned a grin of malice. “Stop; there’s my automobile outside. Seen some wear, but good for ninety pounds,” cried Freddy, “and I’ll play you for that.”

“We may congratulate ourselves, my dear,” said Petrolina, “on having passed into the possession of a very reputable person.”

"You don't mean that that designing wretch has won me?" I cried in dismay.

"Fact," said Petrolina, "and the poor, pretty pigeon is nearly plucked. But he has had the wit not to set his hand to paper, and paper is what our friend and proprietor wants. He has set his heart on ruining the boy, for hate of Duchess Helen, who escaped his toils, thanks to you and me. Oh! Freddy, Freddy, wretched boy, what are you staking now? See the other man's face as he looks at the face painted so delicately upon the oval of ivory within a rim of brilliants. It was Duchess Helen's present to the boy, that diamond-set miniature of her. He vowed he would never part with it. Oh, foolish Freddy! And he has worn it round his neck by its hair chain for a year; and now he lays it on the table in a sharper's den. What's Yule-Multon saying?"

"Thank you, but not without the chain!"

"The—the hair! Why, that isn't of any value—except as a keepsake," stammered the boy. "Look here, Multon. I'll withdraw that and the miniature as well. Here's my I O U."

But Yule-Multon had seen the date upon the miniature—that of a year back—and the engraved "From Nell," and a devilish scheme had begun to breed in his busy brain. Oh, what could not be worked in the way of revenge had he but possession of that miniature. Who would believe when Duchess Helen should say—"I gave it to my brother!"

Freddy had returned chain and miniature to their hiding-place next his foolish, honest young heart, and was standing at the pier-glass fastening his collar, when Yule-Multon made his last bid.

"Look here, I'll stake you all I've won from you, to the last *sou*, against that miniature. I will, upon my soul." He cut the cards. "It's my deal—will you play?"

Freddy tied his necktie at the pier-glass. He saw the pack quivering in his antagonist's dexterous hands. His eyes were dimmed, his head hot and dizzy. But *he had seen*—and he knew. He turned and faced Yule-Multon.

"I take you. Done, on one condition, that I deal. I've noticed"—and there was scathing contempt in the quiet voice—"that you're generally fortunate when *you* do."

"Do you insinuate——?" began the other; then he shrugged carelessly. "Deal, with pleasure!" He added something else under his breath.

Freddy took the cards and shuffled them with care. Then he dealt, looking steadily in Yule-Multon's eyes.

"My miniature of Nell against all you've won from me. *I'm a blackguard to chance it,*" the boy said in his heart, "*but if I win I swear before Heaven I'll never bet again. If I lose——*"

His heart beat suffocatingly. He was deadly sick. If he lost his sister's portrait to this knave life would be impossible. He could never hold up his head again—even though Heaven pardoned and

Helen forgave him. She had nursed him through typhoid fever at the risk of her own life. He felt her cool breath upon his burning forehead and her gentle touch upon his hand as in those days. Yes, he would shoot himself if he *lost*. He swore it in his soul as he took up his hand.

It was wretched—a broken flush of the lowest cards. Such a rush of colour came into his haggard cheeks at sight of it that Yule-Multon, watching for signs out of the corners of his eyes, could have sworn the cards were of the best. His own were nothing to boast of—a pair of sevens, a tray, and an ace. While this infernal young fool——

Freddy, looking him straight in the face, bubbled over with laughter. That such a little thing as a hand of cards—five bits of painted pasteboard—should send Nell into mourning. His eyes danced, the colour ebbed and flowed under his clear skin.

“No call? Will you see me—or pass?” His voice rang clear, loud and triumphant. “Such a fool could not bluff to save his life,” thought Yule-Multon, and flung down his wretched hand with a bitter curse. Then the boy, who had won back both honour and life, threw down his own, and the pile of notes and gold, the watch and chain, and the studs, changed hands. And I had regained my master.

“You — won’t sup here — and give me my revenge?” said Yule-Multon, with a last effort, as Freddy took hat and stick, and with buttoned-up

coat over pockets twice as bulging as before, went to the door. The boy looked back.

"Thanks—no ! I'm going to be a bit more careful of my company in future," said the boy composedly.

"You young——"

"I am young," said Freddy, turning in the doorway ; "but—shall I tell you one thing, Captain Yule-Multon ?"

"Do—and be hanged to you !" snarled the discomfited sharper.

Freddy rang the lift-bell in the corridor before he said, very slowly :

"That winning hand of mine—that was a bluff !"

Then he stepped into the lift and descended to the ground-floor. He chuckled as he got into me, and we started at a smooth, gliding pace.

"I'll go home to-morrow," said the boy, "and see Nell and make a clean breast of it. Why, there's young April."

"Young April," as little Lord Frickham was nicknamed at Eton because he was so extremely green and tender, jumped at the hail, and sprang to Freddy's side as he checked me.

"I say, aren't you a swell. Where did you raise the machine ? Bully—oh, bully !"

"Look here, young man," said Freddy, magisterially, "are you here alone ?"

"I—yes, I am. I was at Mentone with Mother and the girls."

"Why ain't you at school ?"

"I've left Eton, you know," said Frickham, with a healthy blush. "I go to Oxford next term, and I'd a throat, and they—Mater's medical men—said the south of France was as good as anywhere. And so we came. Jane is stopping at the Villa Bourboule—my cousin Jane, you know. She's uglier than ever, and the Mater rubs it in that I've got to marry her because she's a Viscountess in her own right, and as rich as a Jew. And I hate her—at least, whenever I think about having to marry her. And ever since I saw Madame Henriette Baziél act in London last June, I've—I've been worse." Frickham was all red, red hair, reddish-brown eyes, red freckles, and red blushes as Freddy looked hard at him. "She played in *L'Impair* and *Papa Patachon*. And, by Jove, I think she's the loveliest woman in the world."

"And you're in love with her, you young ass!" said Freddy, "and rushed over here to catch a glimpse of her."

"How the dickens did you guess? But it's true. We're stopping in a beastly *pension*, with other people as poor as church mice, and I read in the paper that she was here, and I bolted and came over. Now I'm off to the Casino to try and get a glimpse. Ta-ta!"

"You won't get it," said Freddy, cruelly. "She left on her steam motor-car—an eighteen horse-power Oiseau vapomobile—this morning. I saw her go. I heard her call out to the Duc de Blanque-

ville : ‘ *Au revoir, mon cher!* I go by Lyons, Dijon, Chaumont, and Nogent—to Paris. Come and see us soon in the Chaussee d’Antin.’ ”

“ ‘I go by Lyons, Dijon, Chaumont, and Nogent, to Paris.’ And she lives in the Chaussee d’Antin,” repeated poor downcast Frickham. “Lucky beast of a Duc to be asked to go to see her. What are you stopping for?”

“It’s the telegraph bureau. I’m going to cable to my sister to say I’m coming home,” Freddy said over his shoulder, as he ran up the crooked stone steps. The bureau was crowded; he scribbled out his cablegram and waited several moments before the harassed clerk could attend to him. When he ran down the steps again he opened his blue eyes in astonishment. No Frickham, no automobile!

“He can drive, the little beggar, and he’s taken the car for a run. Like his cheek,” said Freddy.

A beggar upon crutches shuffled up and tendered a scrap of paper. Freddy tossed the man half a franc; he offered the bit of paper persistently.

“From the other English gentleman,” he said at last, and Freddy, unfolding a leaf torn from Frickham’s notebook, read these words, hastily scribbled in pencil :

“*Au revoir, mon cher.* I go by Lyons, Dijon, Chaumont, and Nogent—to Paris. Don’t split to the Mater.—FRICKHAM.”

“Confound the fellow! He has bolted with my

car!" shouted Freddy. A vision rose before him of Frickham, in a halo of dust, pursuing a lovely will-o'-the-wisp, at prohibited speed, along French highways, while Lady Frickham played Sister Anne on the balcony of a cheap Mentone *pension*. His wrath changed to laughter, the whole thing was so much in the style of young Lochinvar. He walked home to the hotel laughing, and went home next day by the express from Turin.

V.

"A new experience for you, Automobile, my dear, wise as you are getting," cried Petrolina, with a triumphant chuckle. "This scamp of a boy, 'Young April,' has eloped with us. We are on the track of his charmer, and he will have to pile on speed to catch her up—if ever he does——"

The rest was lost in the rush of my going. Mercy! how Frickham drove. And as he went he muttered between his clenched teeth: "Lyons, Dijon, Chaumont, Nogent, Paris!" I trembled for my pneumatic tyres, remembering the Bishop of Baverfield's painful experience. But one could not but feel that, were Frickham "projected into the air" by any such untoward accident, the boy would rebound unhurt from the surface of Mother Earth, like a tennis ball. He had five hundred francs in his pocket, this young adventurer, an English half-sovereign, and a Norwegian copper piece of one ore. It would be

necessary to be economical. At Grenoble he stopped, bought a long loaf of bread, some bottles of mineral waters, and a gigantic bunch of bananas. He also expended two francs on a road-map, which he spread upon the vacant seat beside him, and weighted with bottles of soda-water. All through the day the boy drove, without overtaking anything like the eighteen horse-power car of which he was in search. Carters cracked their whips at him, and petrol touring-cars were left behind upon the road. Once a wicked-looking, grey-painted, racing-car, the driver-owner's uncomfortable, low-backed seat occupying but a tiny space behind the big wedge-nosed engine and the capacious tank, appeared on the distant road, and flashed by, leaving Frickham with a mental photograph of a haggard, determined face, and red, weary eyes peering through a talc mask.

"Biggles, on his Thousand-mile Cup-winner," said Frickham to himself. "I wonder whether he has seen her?"

She, of course, being Madame Henriette Bazel.

She had, as it happened, and smiled and bowed to the hollow-eyed champion as he flashed by, and said to her companion afterwards—speaking of the ugly racing car: "She is an awful guy"—to translate Madame's Parisian slang literally — "*Mais elle marche!*"

Madame's own vehicle was walking at the pre-historic rate of thirty-five miles an hour. Sunset was dying and the lonely star of twilight palely shin-

ing under the growing curve of the new moon, when the speed lessened, and the engine began to give off warning hiccoughs. Madame's companion, a stiff, middle-aged example of irreproachable respectability, shrouded in yards of blue gauze from the sun and dust, uttered shrill cries. The car was brought to a standstill, the driver and the chauffeur peered under the high-bodied vehicle, unbonnated the engine, and inspected the water-tank. The regulator leaked, the exhaust valve simply shrieked to be reground—a simple process enough when materials for regrinding are at hand. But in the present instance, they were not. And there was no spare valve.

"We are within three miles of a town of small size, but doubtless possessing an automobile agent; let us send Michel forward to get the valve reground, and purchase a spare one. We can sup *al fresco* by the roadside. It will be amusing!" suggested the driver.

"My friend, Michel has already proved himself an idiot. I would rather thou went. Thou art an athlete; the three miles will be nothing to those long legs of thine," said Madame, smiling like a sorceress through the latest thing in veils. "Thou knowest, Charles."

Charles glanced through his goggles rather ruefully at the extremities thus complimented.

"In such heat—and dust," he murmured.

Madame had her retort.

“Didst thou heed those in Africa?”

Charles explained that the thirst for military glory had caused him to overlook these discomforts.

“Once a soldier of France—always a soldier of France. Forward!” said Madame, dramatically, and Charles set the long legs obediently in motion. He looked back at a bend where the white road grew steeper. Madame kissed her hand.

“This is a *rigolade*, without doubt! *Parole d'honneur!*” he grumbled. But he strode forward manfully and vanished out of sight. The companion kindled a spirit-lamp at the roadside, a respectful distance from the car. “Where there are explosives one must be careful,” she observed. Singing as carelessly and as sweetly as a bird, Madame Henriette opened a cunningly bestowed hamper, and took out a store of capital things—bread and salad, pats of golden butter wrapped in green leaves, sausage, *pâté*, hard-boiled eggs, cream-cheese, pastry, and fruit. Coffee was made—smelling divinely. Madame had just poured it out when Frickham arrived upon the scene.

“I have seen that little English boy before,” thought Madame Henriette. He recognised her, panted, put on the screaming brakes so hard that I described a half-circle in the dust, and, as I halted, quivering and white with dust as any miller, his red eyebrows were frosted as with premature age, a coating as of damp flour adhered to his snub, school-boy features, but the worship in his reddish eyes,

blazing under their white eye-lashes, was plain, as he noted the stationary car, the chauffeur tinkering in its bowels, and the ladies by the roadside.

"I'm so awfully sorry," he began; "how did it——" then he checked himself and blundered into schoolboy French.

"I also speak the English," Madame assured him; and surely there never was a prettier accent.

"You have come to grief somehow; can I be of any use?" implored Frickham.

"Of use? Monsieur, I do not know——" She put one exquisitely-gloved finger to the distracting dimple in her chin.

"Some petrol—or a spanner—or oil——"

"Ah," she said, pondering, her bright eyes half-closed, "it may be oil that is needed. Could Monsieur spare some?"

"My heart's blood!" burst from poor Frickham, and then blushes covered him.

"A little oil would be more useful," she said, innocently. Oh! how innocent she could be when she chose.

"My cherished, the coffee spoils!" called the companion.

"We are coming, Adele! Monsieur" — she turned all her bright artillery upon poor Frickham — "Monsieur will share with us. We are fellow-travellers, and Monsieur will not refuse the hospitality of the road."

Adele, her blue veil raised above a well-powdered

chin, received Frickham with smiles. They sat and ate—glorified sausage, celestial ham, the pastry of fairyland, and drank the coffee of the immortals. Afterwards Henriette produced a little flask of liqueur.

Each had a *chasse*, Adele took a second. Sitting by the road they chatted while the sunset glowed deepest orange, and the shadows stretched longer and bluer. *She* smoked a cigarette. Frickham had one from her dainty case, though perfumed Turkish tobacco was despised at school, and the meerschaum in his pocket burned to come out.

He was surprised to find himself telling Madame everything, about the beastly *pension*, and the girls, and Jane. Looking sideways at Madame Henriette's piquant profile, listening to her charming voice, entangled in the net of her delicate witcheries, how very, very plain Jane appeared. He was deeper in love every instant. He wondered whether she guessed? Simple Frickham. He blurted out the reason of his bolt over to Monaco. Grown bold, he confessed the theft of ME. She laughed and clapped her hands.

"But it is a *Gasconnade*! Monsieur cannot be English. Adele—do listen to this!"

She told the story in her clear-cut, exquisite French, Frickham watching the play of her mouth, eyes, and fingers. Suddenly, as Adele collapsed in shrieks of laughter, he realised that it was funny! That she found his devotion amusing, his frantic

pursuit an excellent joke. He sprang to his feet with choking throat and smarting eyes. He bowed with his best grace, and——

“But stop, Monsieur!” she cried, and rose. “You are not going?”

“I—I think I’d better. Good-bye, Madame,” stuttered poor Frickham. His idol had laughed. He could never get over it. He held out his hand bravely, but his heart was broken.

She looked at him with eyes in which the mocking light was quenched in tears. We will assume that they were real tears. Her lips quivered. “Will Monsieur leave two ladies alone—unprotected? It grows late—our companion has not returned——”

“Beast that I am!” thought Frickham. He declared his willingness to protect Madame and her friend from annoyance or alarm even at the peril of his life. He was beautifully thanked, even as the long legs of Monsieur Charles came striding down the hill. He brought the valve, reground. Had had something to eat and drink at an inn. Was ready to take the road as soon as the valve was adjusted. Frickham dejectedly took leave once more.

“Nonsense! Since you have come part of the way to Paris after us, you may as well travel the rest of it with us,” said Madame. By “us” she meant “me.” She introduced Frickham to Monsieur Charles as “a fellow-countryman of the author of *Hamlet*.” The touch of grandiloquence

in her tone ! Was she laughing again ? But by this time it was too dark to see her eyes. She invited him to join the party in her "Oiseau." The chauffeur should drive Frickham's car. They were to stay the night at Lyons. *Voyez*, there was an extra couch in Monsieur Charles's room.

"It will be jolly, most extremely," said Monsieur Charles, who also spoke English, and whose moustache and cavalry swagger had prejudiced Frickham. "What, then, you still have the scruples ? *Zut, alors !* For you the bed, for me the sofa, if you will. We soldiers can sleep on the edge of a blunt knife."

"And I want to show you my theatre in Paris, and my house—and my little rabbits," said Madame.

Frickham swallowed the sweet bait. Oh ! the fun and the laughter, the successes and the mishaps of that journey to Paris. The picnics by the roadside, the halts at quaint country inns, the zest that Henriette gave to everything, with her humour, her good temper, her irony, her tenderness, her wrath. On the evening of the third day they entered Paris by one of the great illuminated boulevards. Frickham, who had hitherto arrived in the grey dawn, crawled sleepily out of the stuffy Paris express, and been joggled through stale back-streets in a smelly omnibus, to be decanted in the stony courtyard of a rigidly British hotel, felt as though he had never seen Paris before.

"Thou wilt look after him—the little milord?" whispered Madame to Monsieur Charles, when, after a dinner at the Café de Paris, and a play at the Varieties, she bade Frickham good-night. "Remember, I trust him to thee. It is a good little one, and I will not have him come to harm."

And she dismissed the young men. Frickham was to sleep at Monsieur Charles's flat. Fearfully and wonderfully gorgeous was that bachelor residence, an *entresol* of four rooms in the Rue des Gommeux. The room assigned to Frickham was draped like a Moorish tent, and adorned with trophies of arms and pipes. Such pipes! a collection of the pipes of all the nations of the world. The smoking-room was Japanese, and as Frickham sat in a great carved chair, smoking one of his host's Havanas, and noted the portrait of Madame in a turquoise-studded silver frame, reigning chief among the portraits of pretty women crowding the mantelshelf, his heart knew a pang of bitter, boyish jealousy.

"You—you seem great friends," he said, and Monsieur Charles, lounging in a brocade gown on a divan, his embroidered silk slippers in the air, made up his mouth into a funny screw before he answered.

"But yes—we are friends. All my life we are friends, Madame and me."

"Bragging brute!" thought poor Frickham, scowling at the sabretaches and the sabres and the

spurs and whips and foils that distinguish the apartment of a dandy cavalryman. But he warmed, in spite of himself, to the charm of Monsieur Charles's hospitality. There were tones in his voice, glances of his eye, that reminded Frickham of the goddess he adored. He telegraphed to Lady Frickham to say that he was with friends in Paris, carefully forgetting to mention their names, and would return in two days' time. And he saw a rehearsal at Madame Henriette's theatre, and drove out to her house in the Bois de Boulogne to late breakfast. His goddess, looking adorable, gave him both hands. Adele of the powdered nose gave him three fingers. Madame Henriette was all smiles, all enchantment. Her house was a miracle of beauty and good taste, but Jane would have said there were too many flowers, and Lady Frickham would have been shocked at the extravagance of point lace blinds. She gave him her photograph, "With charming recollections of our journey," written in small characters on the margin, above a giant signature.

"You return to-morrow, milord?" she said; and poor Frickham felt that somehow it was a command. "But before we part I must show you my little rabbits."

The little rabbits were three fair, pretty children. They appeared at *dejeuner*, smiling over embroidered lace bibs, and beat with silver-gilt spoons upon the table, shrieking "Papa!" as Monsieur

Charles appeared. He kissed them all round and then, with a queer look at Frickham, embraced Madame Henriette, while the poor little milord went hot and cold.

"Monsieur asked me last night whether we were friends?" He pulled her pink ear, smiling, as Frickham bounded in his chair. "I told him 'All my life.'"

"It is true," said Madame Henriette, turning to the scarlet boy. "Mother and son are friends in France. It is not so in England?"

Frickham could not speak. They thought the soup had burned him, or they said they thought so.

"A little ice-water," suggested Adele. "Charles, the ice-water stands by thy mother. No, Nini, thy hand is too small. Let papa have the *carafe*, my child."

Frickham could not restrain himself.

"Are you? . . . Is it true?" . . .

"That this long-legged cuirassier is my son? But certainly," said Madame Henriette, with the prettiest matronly air. "Certainly, monsieur. Also that Adele there is my dear daughter-in-law, and that these little rabbits are my grandchildren. I must introduce you to my husband also. He will join us later."

He proved, when he joined them, much too young a husband to be the father of the volatile Monsieur

Charles. In fact, he was Madame's third. She adored him, evidently. He was a banker of Alsatian extraction, whose "b's" were "p's," and whose name was M. Josich.

Frickham felt giddy as he took leave. She was kind, she was lovely, even in the morning light, but she was a mother and a grandmother, and married for the third time to a M. Josich.

"Is it all over?" she asked, as she gave him her hand. "You love me no longer, is it not so? But you will take my photograph home to England and remember your friend Henriette when you look at it, and you will marry the little Vicomtesse Jeanne, and be happy ever after!" She kissed his cheek as his own mother might have done. "You are half angry with me now for not being all you dreamed . . . is it not? But by and by you will be glad that I showed you my little rabbits. Adieu, milord, and—*bon voyage!*"

She waved her white hand from the balcony and threw Frickham a rose. M. Josich stood beside her, Charles and Adele were behind, arm-in-arm, the little rabbits were clinging to her dress. Frickham thought his heart was broken as he drove away in a rattle-trap Paris cab. But he went and saw her act that night, and wore his gloves out applauding, and laughed until he cried. He met M. Charles in the *foyer*.

"My friend—whom I have known all my life—

told me to give you this." He gave Frickham a little package. "You are not to open it until you get back to Mentone."

Frickham drove back to rejoin Lady Frickham and the girls, and Jane, at a very sober and reasonable pace, knowing the scolding that awaited him. I may add that he got it.

The packet contained a turquoise and diamond pin. Frickham has always cherished it. He wore it on his wedding day, three years later, and Jane——

Jane makes a good wife and Frickham a conscientious, if unimpassioned, husband.

VI.

I travelled back to England with the Frickhams. Freddy Fosvil—on my return—lent me to a friend. Not an old friend—a decidedly young and fair one, in the person of Miss Nora Philadelphia Van Cupper, whose acquaintance he had made at the memorable costume ball given by the Duchess of Kineddar, at Strongholdness House that very season.

"I guess you think, when I say how badly I need rest and quiet, that Piccadilly ought to seem as peaceful as a desert after the racket of N'York. Well, it is pretty noisy, and that's a fact. We keep going considerable. But the kind of rest I want

is what the 'possum longs for in the fall, when the niggers are round of nights with pine-knots and guns."

"You mean you're hunted by people. You see," said Freddy, "American ladies are always welcome over here. When they're piquant and clever, and have got heaps of squirrel-coloured hair and big, coffee-coloured eyes with yellow lights in them"—the eyes he described did not lower their long lashes the hundredth of an inch—"then they're especially welcome."

"More especially," said Miss Van Cupper, "when they happen to belong to what your society papers call the 'millionocracy.' If Poppa hadn't founded the United States Chewing-Gum Trust, and secured the absolute monopoly of the article, say, do you suppose for one minute these blue-blooded English aristocrats would take any notice of Momma and me?"

"I have not yet had the pleasure," said Freddy, "of being presented to Mrs. Van Cupper."

"I guess you won't ever have it," said Miss Van Cupper. "Momma sailed for Amurrica yesterday. She'd gone right through the London season with me, and she was about tuckered out. She's going home to hire a cheap flat in an unfashionable quarter, and she means to have a hired help and do her own cooking, and wear a wrapper all day. That's her idea of a rest. Now mine is to do a tour of this cunning little green England of yours in an auto-

mobile, with my best friend, Sadie Vermont. She's real sweet, is Sadie."

"I can only repeat that my motor is at your service," said Freddy. "It's a capital machine!"

"I meant to buy a real convenient large one," said Miss Van Cupper; "but if you will kindly say how much you would accept for yours——"

"Dear lady, mine is not for sale," said Freddy, rather red. "If you will use it, I shall be charmed, if not——"

"You will excuse me, won't you?" said Miss Van Cupper, "for supposing you wanted to trade."

"Of—of course!" Freddy stuttered, blushing healthily.

"You're real generous, and I'll take the very greatest care——" began Miss Van Cupper. "You'll forgive me again for asking whether the acceptance of such an offer as you have made me could be considered as anyways compromising to a young lady?" Her bright eyes consulted Freddy's frankly. "You ain't compelled to marry a gentleman because you've borrowed his automobile, are you?"

"Great Scot, no!" said Freddy.

"I breathe more freely," admitted Miss Van Cupper, "because, though you're heir to a title and as handsome as can be, you're real poor, though you're the son of a lord—not that that's uncommon. But, you see, Poppa says the husband I've got

to have must be something in the earl line, if all the dukes are bespoken. Poppa won't invest his millions in anything lower down. He's got a cinch on that idea, and I dunno as he isn't right. And so—no matter how nice I thought you, and I *do*—it—it wouldn't pan out—not nohow. And I said what I did about borrowing your automobile because once, when I accepted a bouquet from an Italian count, and wrote a note of thanks, Poppa had to pay ten thousand dollars to quiet him and get me off. It was a passionate proposal of marriage, in the Language of Flowers, you see. . . . I've learned that language since, and you bet I don't take tulips and roses from anything under an unmarried marquis."

"Quite right," said Freddy. "And I hope Miss Vermont will be as careful."

"My!" exclaimed Miss Van Cupper, elevating her pretty eyebrows. "Why, Sadie hasn't a dollar to her back. She's a school teacher—if she is real elegant, and comes of one of the oldest families in the States. And she wanted a vacation in Europe, and that's why I brought her along."

Freddy fixed his eyeglass in his eye reflectively. "I should like to know a *poor* American girl—for a change," he said, plaintively. "It would be so new."

"I guess you will know Sadie some day," said Miss Van Cupper.

"I shall pant, figuratively, for that day's dawn-

ing," said Freddy. "Meanwhile, my car stands underneath your windows."—Miss Van Cupper occupied a palatial suite of apartments at the Harlton—"dying to know whether you approve of her or otherwise?"

Miss Van Cupper peeped between the lace draperies at me as I basked in the sunshine of the Haymarket, between a smart *coupé* and a glittering drag. She said I was "as cunning as could be," and she accepted me as a loan, for July. And, at that moment, Miss Sadie Vermont came into the room so noiselessly that Freddy did not hear her, and jumped violently when he turned and saw her standing behind him. She was nothing to look at, Freddy said to himself—and then she seemed everything.

It is difficult to describe her. She was dressed in diaphanous brown muslin, with a tiny yellow leaf on it. She was small and slight, and ivory-pale. She had great widely-opened eyes of an indescribable colour, emerald-green in some lights, blue-black in others, in others brownish-blue. She was crowned with folds upon folds of rich hair, perfectly straight, lustreless, inky black. Her skin was an unflushed ivory, and she was as slender as a lily on its stalk. Both hands—such delicate, tiny hands, pink-nailed and ringless—were full of letters.

"I have brought your mail, Nora," she said in a voice as sweet and low as though a wood-dove had been suddenly gifted with a voice, Freddy thought,

and in the instant Duchess Helen's brother was fathoms deep in love — with a school-teaching American girl, who travelled as a vacation secretary.

"Mr. Fosvil—Miss Vermont," introduced Miss Van Cupper.

Miss Vermont bowed, very slightly.

"I'll read all those letters by and by, I guess," said Miss Van Cupper. "I can surmise what the bulk of 'em will turn out. Proposals. I've had as many as twenty in one afternoon. And the nerve of the men just astonishes me, every time. What I'm going to do now is to plan out a route for our automobile tour, with Mr. Fosvil."

"Our tour with Mr. Fosvil?" Miss Vermont's delicate eyebrows moved upwards.

"That girl is as proud as an empress," thought Freddy. "Is America full of school-marms of this type?"

He explained that he had offered Miss Van Cupper the use of his car, unhampered by the society of the owner.

"Nora wants to drive from London to Edinburgh," said Miss Vermont.

"It's a stunning route," said Freddy, eagerly; "and Strongholdness is on the road. I will write to my sister; she would be charmed if you looked her up. She will be there by the sixth, because of the babies."

"I do not think we need trouble the Duchess,"

said Miss Vermont, calmly. Miss Van Cupper opened her eyes.

"But we will, I guess—that is, if her Grace will be good enough to allow us. Why, I've heard all sorts of things about Strongholdness Castle. It was built with blood for mortar, in the eleventh century. There's a mysterious chamber in it, and the walls are full of Oliver Cromwell's crossbow-bolts and cannon-balls."

"As you please," said the proud, gentle voice.

"An old place of ours is on the route, too; you might take a peep at it," said Freddy to the heiress. "It's a moated priory-house, very tumbledown—Fosvil Chase, in Bedfordshire. Henry VIII. stole it from the monks and gave it to Simon de Fosvil in 1533. We have a tumbledown old castle in North Wales, but the Chase was always the place I liked best as a boy. . . . My father never goes there; he prefers the Continent, or London—says the moat is rheumatic, and the old oaks give him the blues. There's an avenue of 'em two miles long. Yes, my father hates the Chase. . . . As for me, I think it the dearest place in the world!"

"Then why don't you live there? I guess I would," said Miss Van Cupper. Replying, Freddy looked not at the heiress but at the heiress's secretary.

"I'm too poor," he said, bluntly.

Miss Vermont looked him full in the face. Her faintly-rose-tinted lips were apart, showing the small

white teeth. Her great eyes were interested and kind.

"You may be rich enough—some day," she said, diffidently.

"No," said Freddy, drawing a short hard breath. "It's mortgaged to the last acre of ground; my father is not the best of business men. Some day a millionaire will ask me down there to stay, and he will have pulled down the old carved fireplaces and turned the chapel into a ballroom and stripped the ivy from the walls and drained the moat. . . . And I shall be asked to admire his improvements—when I want to shoot him. Good-bye. I'll send the car round when it has been cleaned, and, I do hope," he added, as he took the slim little secretary's hand, "that you'll have a jolly holiday."

He went away quickly.

"Oh, Freddy, you downcast young man!" said Petrolina, gleefully, as we tooted up the Haymarket towards Piccadilly, "if your father is a bad man of business, the same can't be said of you, my dear. You have brought off the cleverest stroke you ever made in your whole life of twenty-six years, and the best of it is that you're not aware of it. Now we're going to be cleaned and oiled. Freddy will see to everything himself most conscientiously. And there will be a plaid of the Kinneddar tartan folded over the back of the seat, and a sprig—no, two sprigs of heather—though heather is barely yet in bloom—pinned to the cushions, and the route

pricked out on a map with crosses in green pencil for Fosvil Chase and Strongholdness. . . . And for whom is all this trouble taken? Guess! Not for the heiress—but for the secretary. Ha, ha, ha!”

Freddy got a letter of acknowledgement from Miss Van Cupper, Petrolina told me, written in a particularly neat, business-like hand, possibly the secretary’s. It had a postscript:

“I have been looking—I mean, Sadie has been looking up your name in the Peerage. And I see you are an earl’s son, though you’re only called honourable. That is, of course, because your elder brother is a viscount. Therefore, I do trust you will overlook what I said to-day. The recollection of it has made me feel considerable cheap ever since. Thank you ever so for sending the motor.”

“There was an addendum in a delicate, upright hand,” said Petrolina, giggling:

“‘We so much regret that we shall not be able to visit Fosvil Chase!’

“‘Now, I suppose that is the Van Cupper’s fist,’” said Freddy. “He kissed the other—you know the way he did it, my dear!—and went on talking to himself: ‘Perhaps it’s as well that they can’t drive through the Chase. Medstock writes me that the Highland cattle Nell sent three years ago are getting quite dangerous to people driving or walking through the park, or would-be picnic-parties. And Lazarus and Simon won’t wait—that’s another bit of news he sends me. The estate isn’t properly entailed—

they'll foreclose after Christmas if the principal and interest aren't paid up then, and . . . oh! it's a sweet letter. Comforting and cheering, very, to a pauper who's in love with another pauper.' And he tramped up and down his chambers until he was sick of tramping, and then told his man to pack a portmanteau—and where do you think he has gone, my dear? Can't imagine? Stupid Automobile! Down to Fosvil Chase to bid the old oaks good-bye. He had better be careful of the Highland cattle himself. There is one bull, a shaggy, white creature with a red, wicked eye. 'The De'il,' the Scots herdsman-keeper calls him—and he deserves the name. . . . Now, here are our two Americans. The secretary has style, don't you think? Odd, that she should take the driver's seat—but she can drive, and our heiress—the Chewing-Gum Princess, as the New York papers call her—can't for peanuts. A tiny hand on the driving-wheel and a small—quite a Cinderella-like—foot on the pedal; but both have had plenty of experience. The road won't get interesting until we have left Doncaster well behind us on our second day's journey. So these girls will talk about their own affairs. If you listen well, my dear, you will find out why our pretty Freddy has done an excellent stroke of business. I puzzle you? He, he, he!"

And thus the provoking creature continued until, dusty but in unimpaired condition, we entered Bedfordshire, and turning aside from the Great

North Road, passed in by the stately, ruinous lodges of Fosvil Chase.

"My land!" I heard the heiress say. "And you wrote a postscript to that poor, dear boy to tell him you wouldn't have time to look at his Tudor oaks. Well, of all the contradictory creatures on this earth, you're the most so, Nora!"

"She means Sadie," I said, and Petrolina sniggered.

"Of course she does. I must admit, my dear, that you have a very clear comprehension of things that are under your front lamps."

I snorted a little as I drove the burnt gas out of my cylinder. I was five years old and had seen a good deal of hard wear and tear. And I had never quite got over Frickham's mad race in pursuit of Madame Henriette. And there had been a meddlesome ostler at Biggleswade who had—in the absence of my chauffeur—insisted on opening my bonnet and poking about inside. A cone on my wheel ball race wanted renewing, perhaps, or the——

"Tut, tut!" said Petrolina, "what a fuss you are making, my dear."

"The house is about two miles distant," said Miss Vermont, as the heiress entreated to know "if anything was wrong?" "We will run on under the shade of these glorious oaks—no wonder Mr. Fosvil said he loved them—and then while we are looking at the picture-gallery and the chapel, and

the other lovely old things, Willis can get down and overhaul the engine."

Willis, relegated to the back seat, touched his cap.

"I suppose those shaggy white things are deer," said Miss Van Cupper. "Look, Nora, how tame they are. One of them is coming to meet us, the darling. Well, this is real rural England, or my name ain't——"

"Hush!" whispered the secretary. "I do wish you would be careful. The chauffeur belongs to Mr. Fosvil as well as the car, and you've called me 'Nora' twice in the last ten minutes. As for your tame deer, it is no more a deer than I am. What did you say, Willis? A Highland bull—and they are dreadfully vicious. . . . Don't be frightened, Sadie"—I wondered why she called Miss Van Cupper by her own name—"we'll simply turn round and run back to the lodge."

And she grasped the lever. But something was wrong with me. I felt it with a shudder of despair. The stud was in the second notch, but I continued, coughing, spitting, and rumbling, to bowl along the broad, mossy avenue, under the noble oaks. And the red-eyed, shaggy, pointed, sharp-horned creature before me, lowered his bossy head and prepared for battle.

"Stop the car! Stop!" screamed Miss Van Cupper, and her companion stopped me indeed, but even as I halted the bull charged.

Crash !

At the tremendous shock of the animal's impact I lost consciousness.

I think I heard screams—I am not sure. I emitted smoke and flame, I believe. When I became clearly aware of things, I knew I was on fire. My petrol had exploded, and the fierce white flame, bursting from every cranny of my buckling engine-box, roared high. There was a horrible smell of singeing hair and charring meat. That came from a dead bull, lying partly over me. He was a gallant fellow and had made his last charge.

But my passengers—my charges—my chauffeur ! Even in the agonies of conflagration I could think of them.

"They are quite safe, my dear," said a cynical voice I knew to be Petrolina's; "they jumped out as the bull charged, and nobody is more than a scratch the worse, except the pretty secretary—the attractive pauper of poor Freddy's waking and sleeping dreams—she has twisted her ankle. He carried her all the way to the house." She chuckled.

"Who?" I panted. "Oh, will nobody come and put me out?"

"Here come some labourers with tarpaulins," said Petrolina. "You will be a nice spectacle, I can tell you, when they *have* put you out. Ah ! my dear, we have taken our last spin together, you and I !"

“At any rate, I killed the bull,” I said, groaning; “that is some consolation.”

“You’re wrong, my dear,” snapped Petrolina, “the bull had picked himself up and was preparing for a second charge, or perhaps to chase the ladies, when Freddy shot him. He was strolling with his gun, and he came upon the scene in time to give ‘The De’il’ the contents of a shot-cartridge, right in the middle of his stupid brain. And then he carried the lovely Miss Vermont to the house. That interesting pauper has made a very deep impression, my dear. And Freddy, as I said before, is a lucky—— Here are the men with the tarpaulins.”

They put me out with difficulty, and drenched me with bucketfuls of water from a pond, to cool me, and then—a shattered, buckled, cinderous wreck—I was towed by a cart-horse to the stables.

“Good-bye, my dear, for the present. I am going to see after our young people!” said Petrolina. And presently she was back in the highest spirits.

“They are getting along excellently,” she reported. “Freddy has sent for the Vicar’s wife to play chaperon and propriety in general, whilst he plays host to the heiress and the secretary. Fortunately some of the cleanest of the old rooms are aired, and the housekeeper has sent for the North Lodge-keeper’s wife, who was cook here in the good old days. As for Miss Van Cupper and her secretary, they haven’t a thread left to wear except what they have got on them—their luggage has been

burned, poor dears. But they have telegraphed to the heiress's maids—who were left at the Harlton, and the necessary garments will be here to-morrow."

Later she said: "He had the assurance to carry the secretary down to the dining-room, and leave the heiress to toddle along behind the Vicar's wife. There's respect for wealth! There's a sense of what is due to ——"

"To grace and beauty!" I put in.

"He told her to-night, in the old Queen Anne drawing-room, smelling of moths and ancient *pot-pourri*, that he loved her, and has asked her whether she could be content to marry a poor fellow, not poor through extravagance of his own, but of others—he stopped at others—and she knew that he meant his father. He has told her about his brother—paralysed for life by a fall in a steeplechase, and slowly dying, and about his beautiful sister, Duchess Nell, and about his one stroke of good fortune—the money he won at Monte Carlo. And she has told him—nothing at all! But to-morrow night, when she comes down to dinner with a bankrupt empress's jewels gleaming in her hair and round her lovely throat, she will tell him something."

"And that——"

"That will be, my dear, that she is not Miss Sadie Vermont, the secretary, but Miss Nora Van Cupper, the heiress to Mr. Van Cupper's millions. She will tell him that she practised her deception to get a little rest from the people who are always pursuing

the Chewing-Gum Princess. But that will not be quite the truth. The truth is that she wanted to buy with her poverty what she could never buy were she possessed of all the riches of the dead Incas of Peru—the love of an honest man. And so, good-night, Automobile, my dear. You're a fearful ruin to look at. Still, we have had a pleasant time together, haven't we? Now it is over—without your getting as far as Edinburgh. But your little affair with the bull, and the resulting flare-up, has made Freddy a happy lover. . . . What is that you say?"

"You meant it all from the first?" I cried.

There was no reply.

THE SILVER BIRCH.

VIVIELLE had been crying, it was plain to see ; there were red circles round her great blue eyes and tear smudges under them, and her pocket-handkerchief was a mere little wet dab of cambric. Her floss silk of hair, the colour of the ripe corn, was tangled. Every now and then her little white upper teeth bit into her red, pouting underlip, and a sob heaved her childish breast under the dainty, filmy silk muslin blouse—a blouse that had come from Paris, like everything else Vivienne ever wore.

And what was the cause of her grief ? Not that she had been naughty ; she was hardly ever that, they said—the classical tutor and the professor of music, and the teacher of fencing and calisthenics, and the dancing mistress were all agreed that Mademoiselle was the most docile of pupils ; and the German *fraulein* and the English nurse, and the Swiss maid and the French one, declared their little lady to be sweetness itself. But her mother, Madame la Comtesse, had said it was a thousand pities that her only child, the heiress of a princely fortune and the sole hope of one of the noblest families of France, fortunate in the possession of beauty and intelligence

as well as of birth and breeding, should be so awkward, so *gauche*, so angular in all her movements, so clumsy at calisthenics, so ungraceful in the dance. And Vivielle knew it was the truth.

"She will be clever," said M. le Comte, oracularly. "She will write novels like Gyp, or paint like Louise Barcella."

"*Belle vocation!*" commented Madame la Comtesse, with a shrug. "Ink on the fingers—or paint. Which, as a lover, would you choose to kiss?"

"It is scarcely a question of kissing yet," said Monsieur, "seeing that Vivielle is still a mere child. When she is marriageable, she will be so great an heiress that the question will never need to be asked. A man does not merely kiss the hand of the woman who has paid his debts and established him in life. *Ma foi*, no! but her feet, but the ground she walks on. Is it not so, Charles?"

And Monsieur Charles, the handsome, negligent, graceful hussar, had burst out laughing.

"How do I know? I who need so little! A five-franc dinner, a play, an opera-bouffe, and a couple of rooms at the barracks, furnished with whitewash and packing-cases."

"And coats from Aumonier, and uniforms from Roubaix, and diamonds from the Maison Piffany, to say nothing of Blackfern toilettes, and—oh, innumerable bonbons and bouquets," put in Madame la Comtesse.

Charles held up his hands for mercy.

"I give in—it is too hot to defend myself. But of the little one, what nonsense to despair. One of these days she will learn the secret of charm, she will solve the mystery of grace. Not the grace of a *Journal des Modes*, but the other kind. Then"—he kissed his fingers and blew the kiss away—"we shall find her calm as a forest lake, stately as a silver pheasant, graceful as a silver birch, the loveliest and most graceful thing of all. Adieu ! I go to shoot your turnips, since partridges there are none."

Vivielle had heard all, without meaning to listen, which was bad form and ill-bred, and all the things one would have preferred not to be. The wide balcony of the drawing-room had a little wrought-iron staircase leading down into the garden, and she had been sitting half-way down, with apricots in her lap and an English book in her hand. Her head was whirling as she recalled what Monsieur Charles had said :

"One of these days she will learn the secret of charm. . . . We shall find her calm as a forest lake, stately as a silver pheasant, graceful as a silver birch, the loveliest and most graceful thing of all——" Vivielle, who turned her toes in at the dancing lesson, to the despair of M. Roland, and could never make her reverence graceful enough to please her grandmother. Clearly the thing most needful was to see a forest lake, to look upon a silver pheasant, to find a silver birch. She could not recall ever having seen any of these things. So, crying

still a little, she had said to herself : " I shall go and find them, and then——"

The park of the château was land reclaimed from the heart of the forest, one of the historic forests of France. For miles it stretched, a vast ocean of waving foliage and soft green grass, bathed in golden sunshine or the silver rays of the moon, roaring the song of the tempest or sighing the love song of the south-west wind, with its burden of tears. Many of the great oaks were twenty feet in girth, some of the vast beeches could have sheltered half a regiment under their spreading boughs. There were troops of shy deer, and many a fierce old boar sharpened his tusks on a tree stump in his chosen, secret lair, and dreamed of men, and horses, and horns, and the fierce hounds that never turn aside to follow the track of rabbit, hare, or roebuck, but only his. There would be a hunt to-morrow, Vivielle knew ; two hours before daybreak, the foresters, to each man a hound, would go out with lanterns to seek the track. Monsieur Charles was the Master, and wore the myrtle-green uniform with pale blue facings with distinguished grace.

Who was like Monsieur Charles? Who was so gay, so polite, so perfectly at ease? A great duchess had called him perfectly *comme il faut*, and could there be higher praise than that?

It was a splendid autumn morning. The dew hung upon the grass in pearls, and sparkled in the spiders' webs like diamonds. Vivielle's thin slippers

and silken stockings were soon soaked through. The air was full of sweet woodland smells and floating gossamers, "Our Lady's threads," as the peasant-women called them. The green glades, full of shifting beryl-coloured lights and golden shadows, opened out one after another before Vivielle, and closed again; the forest seemed to welcome her with open arms.

Presently the great trees, their boles all covered with grey and orange lichen, fell back, and ranged themselves in a circle, and the grass within the circle became short, sweet emerald moss, upon which lay scattered the red-gold of fallen beech leaves. The trees that sprang from the moss were slender young things, robed in the most delicate of foliage, and in the middle of the clear space there were none. A patch of the sky, intensely clear, intensely calm, unspeakably blue, seemed to have fallen on the emerald moss. Then birds, orioles and swallows and thrushes, rose from the brink, and a hind lifted her wet muzzle and fled to the deep covert of the woods, and——

"It is a lake, a forest lake!" cried Vivielle.

She threw herself down, panting, upon a great boulder, draped with lichens, purple and scarlet and gold, and shaped like a throne. She had never before wandered in the forest, never before suspected what loveliness lay hid in its deep heart. For this was loveliness.

"Still, remote, pure and unsullied, mirroring the

sky in all its changes, yet itself unchanged, whether freezing in the icy arms of winter, or rippled by the pattering rains of spring, or reflecting the lightnings of the hot, cloudy skies of autumn. . . . Refreshment to the thirsty lip, rest to the weary eye, joy of joys to the pure lover of beauty at its loveliest, and yet content to be beautiful, unpraised and unseen; always pure, always constant, always true. A woman who should be like a forest lake would be beautiful indeed."

Vivielle was sure a voice had spoken; she could not be sure whose the voice had been. The golden beetles ran over the sunny spots upon the grey boulders, the ants laboured amongst the forests of the moss-stems, a little sun-warm breeze played to and fro, hiding among the brake-ferns like a child. There was a thick covert of these on the distant shore of the little lake. They waved and parted, and a bird like a living jewel made of many precious gems, moved to the brink to drink. It was as dazzling as a white flame, its eyes were rubies, its train swept the moss like cloth of silver, as it moved and looked to this side and that, and drank and preened its gleaming silver plumage; its beauty moved the child to ecstasy.

"What is it? oh! what is it?" she said aloud, and the mysterious voice said in answer:

"That is a Silver Pheasant. From the banks of the Phasis in Colchis it was brought into Europe in times remote from these, some say by the Argo-

nauts. *Phasianos* is its name in Greek, and it is the proudest of birds; it will not live or feed with the common varieties. - Yet it roosts in low bushes, for all its pride, and common thievish hands most easily capture its loveliness, and sell its flesh in the market, and make dusting-brushes of its sweeping train. There is a legend that it was once a bird of the skies—a dweller in the loftiest tree-tops—and for its sin, because it would not shade with its wings a dying saint, martyred for the Faith by savages, who drove sharp pegs into her hands and feet and crucified her to a tree—it was condemned to run upon the earth like a common barn-door fowl, and drag its dainty plumage in the mire. A woman who should recall in her stately grace, in her elegance of form, and charm of colouring, a Silver Pheasant—would be very fair to see. But she should not scorn her inferiors, and she should always remember that the sin of pride and lack of charity would banish her from the tree-tops, and divorce her from the clouds.”

“ Ah, who are you that speak ?” cried Vivielle.

There was a rustling sound hard by, and some drops of water, as cool as if hoarded from the morning’s dew in some flower-cup or curled leaf, sprinkled her face. She turned her head, and saw, at first, nothing but a slender tree swaying in a sudden breeze. And then she knew that the tree was the speaker.

“ I am the Silver Birch,” it said, waving its slender, flexible branches, and swaying as though

it were dancing. "See my silvery bark set off by the black stole; my shower of leaves, silvery-green, bluish-silver. There are many dancers in the forest, but none so graceful as I. The old peasant folks will tell you I am one of the trees that grew in Paradise. The Highlander dyes his tartan with my bark. In Northern Russia there are whole forests of me, no other tree exists in Greenland; my leaves are a wholesome medicine, and a love-charm for the Esquimaux girls. Travel as the explorer may, northwards or southwards, I am the last tree to disappear on the edge of the Arctic zone, the——"

"But I cannot understand," Vivielle pouted, "how a woman like a Silver Birch could be beautiful," and the tree waved and rippled, and seemed to laugh with its swaying branches.

"Don't you? Watch me when the storm breaks—for here comes one."

The sky reflected in the forest lake was inky blue. The trees bent before a rushing gale that drove sullen masses of cloud before it. The Silver Pheasant vanished in the brake, there was a flash of dazzling light, a growl of thunder, and the Silver Birch curtseyed to the Monarch of the Storm. It sank to the earth, trailing its wet silvery-green hair; it rose and waved its arms, and beckoned; it swooned, and sprang erect, defiantly, its gleaming trunk looking like the bare body of a scourged wood-nymph under the hissing white lashes of the rain. Then the wind fell. No more a fantastic spirit, no more a tortured creature, the Silver Birch

stood erect, slim, fragrant, dignified, composed, a great lady among trees. It still swayed a little, as though laughing. Its cool, silvery voice asked :

“How did you like that?”

“It was—oh——” Vivielle had no words.

“The storm may beat upon me, the rain may scourge me,” said the Silver Birch, “but though I bend, though I writhe, I rise again undaunted, unharmed in beauty, unaltered in grace. A woman who should take the usage of the world as a Silver Birch takes it would be the kind of woman your Cousin Charles meant. *Adieu, ma mignonne!*”

Vivielle had not been asleep. But certainly her blue eyes had been shut, her head thrown back upon one lichened boulder, and her small, diaphanously-clad figure comfortably nestled into a niche between two others, when Monsieur Charles came lightly striding over the moss. He was alarmed for her for an instant, then he smiled, reassured.

“To have been discussing the marriage of this—mere baby. How premature!” he said, and smiled again as he touched her forehead with a friendly kiss, light as the touch of a butterfly’s wing. “Wake up, Vivielle! You have been lost for hours. Madame, Mademoiselle, the Fraulein, Grettiche, and Marie are in despair.”

Vivielle awakened and opened her blue, blue eyes. They rested, unembarrassed, upon the face of Monsieur Charles. Then she rose and dropped him

a little curtsy, lightly as the swaying birch, and gave him her small white hand.

"I thank you, Monsieur, for coming to seek me. Now you shall take me back to the *château*."

"What grace, what aplomb! I never noticed it before. And Madame, her mother, calls her awkward. Heresy!" thought Monsieur Charles. He had intended to tell Vivielle of the stolen kiss, to claim, laughingly, his forfeited pair of gloves; he did not fulfil his intention.

"This is a very beautiful spot!" he said, as they turned to look back before leaving it.

"I shall call it my study," said Vivielle; "I have learned so many things here."

"What have you learned?" asked Monsieur Charles.

"I have learned," she said, "that the best of all things, for a forest lake, or for a woman, is to keep calm, and clear, and always reflect, whatever be the weather, the face of the sky. And I have learned that for a Silver Pheasant, or for a woman, it is not well to be proud—with the pride that scorns mean companionships, yet never lifts itself above base things. And, however the world may treat me when I am no longer a child, I shall try to bear its usage like the Silver Birch. Look at it now, all white and shining in the sunset."

"It might be a girl at her first Communion—or a bride!" said Monsieur Charles. "You will be a bride one of these days, Vivielle," was on the tip of

his tongue, but he kept back the words. Nevertheless, as they trod the green glades of the forest together, they echoed in his heart. "A bride some day. . . . And whose?"

"Look!" said M. le Comte, standing on the vine-draped terrace with Madame la Comtesse, as the couple approached the house. He touched her jewelled hand.

"How she walks . . . what has come to the child?" said the mother.

"How old were you when we were married, my dear friend?" asked M. le Comte.

"Sixteen," said Madame.

"Very good," said M. le Comte. "In a year, my dear, we will see!"

"Ours was a love match!" said his wife.

"There will be no departure from precedent in the next instance," said M. le Comte, who was fond of ornate phrases, and had a singularly keen observation.

There was not.

COUNTESS AND COUTURIÈRE.

“WHAT a loss to Society,” said Lady Pomphrey, “or that brigade of the society division which prides itself on being *dressed* and not *clothed*, was the demise, just when his marvellous creations were gracing the most exclusive social functions on the backs of the smartest women, of the great *modiste* of Paris and London. Who dreamed of him twenty or even fifteen years ago, when Worth and Doucet were the arbiters of fashion? Yet from his tiny place of business, known as the Maison Lalanne, long ago merged in the magnificent establishment of the Rue de la Paix, such marvellous creations came that connoisseurs were electrified, and exclusive mobs of would-be clients besieged his doors, shrieking to be made elegant, striking, original, or distinguished, at his own price. *Passons au déluge*, the tears shed by the two thousand midinettes constantly employed by the firm ought to make another.

“M. Isidore Paquin’s vogue once gained, he kept it to the end, unlike Yvelin, who bloomed into celebrity as suddenly as a cactus flowers, to relapse as soon into obscurity, and who is now quite utterly forgotten. It was in 1896 that a Duchesse of the

Faubourg Saint-Germain said to me, 'You must go to Yvelin,' and I went. She was the client who had *made him*. A creature of tiny proportions, exquisite as a Saxony china shepherdess, with her fair hair, pink complexion, and green sparkling eyes, her figure graceful, her movements lively as a bird's, her gay and brilliant youth shone like a jewel in the coronet of the aged Duke who married her, seated in the bath-chair, from which, without aid, he never stirred, and the *fêtes* and parties, in planning which she took the keenest pleasure, cheered up the vast mansion, which had been ruled in succession by the aristocratic widower's three previous wives.

"My charming friend drove me in her carriage, a vehicle of exquisite luxury, drawn by a superb pair of bays, to the *atelier* of her *protégé*. The gilded balconies were empurpled with a climbing wistaria in bloom. A constant stream of clients poured in and out, the air was full of bright laughter and chatter, the young persons, in severe but beautifully cut black robes, who moved forward to receive me, were nymph-like in their beauty. They doubted whether M. Yvelin would be able to give audience, but when I mentioned the name of his patroness one of them hurried away to ascertain whether Monsieur could not stretch a point—to oblige the Duchesse.

"'If Monsieur consents, it will be at the cost of offending some lady who has waited at least an hour,' the remaining young person impressed upon

me. Certainly there was a *monde feu*. In some parts of the large triple showroom the crush of clients was quite terrific. Several mannequins—not the living article, but the turned ebony and red satin variety — were dotted about, displaying lovely dresses; the place was decorated in pure white with delicate embellishments of gold. The carpets and draperies were moss-green of a lovely shade. Chairs and lounges of every shape and design invited repose. Tall vases were brimming with flowers, the tables were piled with serial literature, several pretty pages in green and gold offered tea and bon-bons, a subdued hush hung over all; for, though all the world's wives were there, they only talked in whispers. Indeed, a polite notice, posted on one of the cedarwood pillars that supported the open corridor-gallery above, requested that conversation should be carried on in an undertone.

“After a prolonged wait a polite official came to me. I was conveyed in a lift to the first floor, and conducted to a mysterious portal closely veiled with the green velvet curtains, embroidered with a “Y” in dull gold. A silver bell chimed. With almost a sensation of nervousness I passed the threshold. The studio of M. Yvelin was a large apartment, illuminated by a flat-roof skylight, furnished with at least half a dozen sets of blinds of different hues. Round the walls were electric lights, supplied with sets of vari-coloured shades, while long looking-glasses, so arranged that they could be pulled out

from the walls and set at different angles for the purposes of the master of the *atelier*, formed a high dado round the bare-looking apartment, which boasted in its centre a kind of model's throne with a chair upon it. At the upper end of the long room was a low velvet divan, and upon this a pale little young man, with a flowing necktie and an abundant head of upright hair, lay flat; staring at the skylight and smoking a cigarette.

"I thought it necessary to cough. The little young gentleman with the hair tossed away the cigarette and got up. He made me a deep bow, to which I responded with a courteous inclination, then folded his little arms upon his breast, and, advancing a pace or two, subjected my personality to a careful and exhaustive scrutiny. He wore a suit of chocolate velvet, made baggily, a silk shirt, and crimson Oriental slippers with curly toes. He was, as I have said, very pale and small, with a little moustache that bristled cattishly, and large, brilliant eyes, one green and the other black.

"I essayed to speak when I thought I had been stared at sufficiently; but M. Yvelin put up one hand with a pained expression, said 'Pardon!' and fell to staring again. His glance seemed to penetrate the inmost recesses of my being; I felt that I was being painlessly vivisected by this artist in clothes. Presently he sighed and invited me to ascend the central platform. I complied. Mounted thereon, M. Yvelin surveyed me through a tube of rolled-

up black paper, and again I underwent the sensations I have described. At last he spoke, and in English :

“ ‘ Madame is of Albion, it is to see. The form so massive—the colour so abundant, the *ensemble* all colossal—magnificent to overwhelm. Madame has been recommended by the Duchesse de X—— ? How long that Madame know her—that personality so ravishing, that elegance of the most seductive, that style of the most *chic* ? Where the Duchesse leads they follow her—the ladies of the great world ; it is what you English call a scramble—an iggle-pigelle—they vie each with each to copy. Who should wonder ? The robe Madame requires—is it for the reception, the dinner, the race, the ball, or the Court ? ’

“ I wanted a garment for a dinner to meet Royalty, to be followed by a reception, and I said so. M. Yvelin demanded the colour of the upholstery and decorations of my host’s drawing-room, and the prevailing hue of the table-decorations to be used on the great occasion. When I confessed that I had not been informed he expressed surprise. No hostess of the great world of Paris, he said sadly, would have neglected to inform her feminine guests upon so important a point. Then he bade me seat myself upon the Louis XV. chair the platform boasted, and hideous to relate, as he pressed with his varnished boot upon a lever hidden under the thick carpet, the platform began to revolve. Dear

friend, I never *could* waltz, so prone am I to giddiness. I said to myself that the ordeal would not last long, and nerved my frame to endurance. Snap! went the great blind over the skylight. I spun in darkness for an instant, then the electric-lights were switched on in blinding brilliancy, only to change, at another movement of the relentless M. Yvelin's foot, to a sickening glare of green, which gave way to dazzling yellow, the yellow being succeeded by blue, and the blue by crimson of the most luridly Mephistophelian shade. My brain whirled, my heart palpitated alarmingly. I mastered sufficient energy to cry, '*Stop, for Mercy's sake!*' but when M. Yvelin politely proffered the assistance of his hand to facilitate my descent from the platform, my exhausted energies gave way. Swooning, I sank upon his shoulder, and—imagine the horror of it!—his frail form bent under my weight, his legs refused to support the double burden, and *couturière* and client collapsed upon the carpet.

"Panting forth apologies, I sought to scramble to my feet. But I had inextricably entangled one foot in the *balayeuse* of Valenciennes which adorned the underskirt of a certainly expensive and decidedly becoming afternoon gown. I remained in a kneeling position. Thus my hands were seized; and as M. Yvelin bent over me, so close that his hot breath stirred the plumes upon my hat and fluttered my veil, while his green eye and his black eye scorchingly devoured my features, he poured forth a flood

of impassioned eloquence which nothing could stem or stay.

“Thou lovest me, then! The frozen heart of the English miladi has melted under the fire of my glances. Is it not so? She, who has doubtless scorned the ducal Ambassador, the Milord Guardsman, and the Sir Millionaire—behold her a suppliant—melted, quivering, imploring—at the feet of the poor artist of Paris. Alas! that I can give thee nothing in return. Woe to me, who dare not drink from the goblet of Love when it is offered; who must ever parch, unslaked, amidst the upraised hands of fair women, offering solace divine. Child—poor little one!—thou shalt know my unhappy secret. I adore the Duchesse de X——, just as thou dost adore me. Let us weep together!—I that I can never love thee, thou that thou art never to be loved by me—both of us for her who glitters above us in her icy radiance, cold and lonely in her crystalline splendour, whilst Paradise awaits her here—here upon my heart. We must part now, for the world is suspicious, and my forewoman, who is another of my victims—the passionate Madame Angelique—has developed a fatal tendency for listening outside the door. Adieu, then, unhappy and most beautiful! Go—and remember Alphonse Yvelin!”

“He raised me gently and led me to the door, showing me out with a profound bow as I staggered from the apartment where I had undergone such a frightful ordeal. Several respectfully-mannered,

but certainly curious-eyed, young persons led me to a fitting-room. My measurements were taken; I escaped to the outer air. As, stepping into a *fiacre*, I drove to the English Embassy, where we were staying, it occurred to me with hideous plainness that I had escaped with my life from a *tête-à-tête* with a maniac.

“Dear friend—quite right. The unhappy Yvelin had lost his head over the Duchesse de X——. The kindly patronage shown him by one of the greatest of great ladies, the playful familiarity of her manner with the artist whose reputation she had made—the delirium of success, coming suddenly to one who had long languished in poverty—all had contributed to the insanity of one who was perhaps the greatest dressmaker Paris had ever seen.

“Did I receive the gown? I did, dear friend, hideously expensive, but a confection of the most divine; a combination of two new shades, marvelously effective by artificial light, and utterly unlike anything one had ever seen on anybody else, don’t you know! A card was pinned to the *corsage*, bearing this inscription:

“‘Should Madame la Comtesse desire to know the name of the two shades combined in this costume, one is the colour of a frustrated passion, and the other the hue of hopeless love.—A.Y.’

“He committed suicide not long afterwards under the most extraordinary circumstances, hanging him-

self in a long silk sash destined to form part of a costume to be worn at Longchamps by his fatally-adored Duchesse. She had received his declaration and laughed at it, people said. She wore the dress at Monte Carlo afterwards, sash and all, and broke the bank in an astonishing series of twenty-three *coups* on the red. People say things of *that sort*—I refer to the sash with such unpleasant associations—bring luck. And she ran away afterwards with a Hungarian violinist. How I chatter, dear friend! You are too indulgent a listener. But what a strange thing life is! And *what* queer creatures we poor mortals are, aren't we? You agree? Naturally. Of course."

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